



The Dawn of the Witch

The Mana Merchant and a Premonition of Love

2

By Kakeru Kobashiri
Art by Takashi Iwasaki

Original Design of Select Characters by
Yoshinori Shizuma



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Los squared off in front of Saybil, then pulled his head down to her chest.

“P-Professor Los...?!”

*She smells so nice.
Is it the tea?
Or is it just her?*

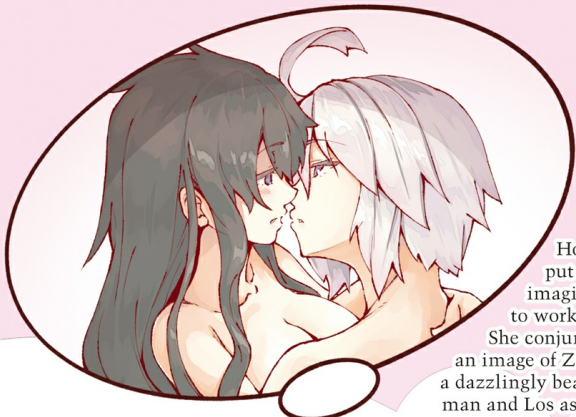
**“There, there! Good lad.
Thou art a good lad, young Sayb!”**





That's
just
obscene!
And
shameless!

It's a mortal
sin—the
Goddess
would never
forgive it!
I'll never
let them have
their way with
my little
Saybina!"



Hort
put her
imagination
to work.
She conjured up
an image of Zero as
a dazzlingly beautiful
man and Los as a
gorgeous boy, then
pictured them stealing
kisses from a young
lady named Saybil...

"Wah!
Awawa...!
Nooope!
Nope,
nope,
nope!"

My?

Saybina...?



Albus
Headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic of the Kingdom of Wenias, she sent Saybil and his classmates to the village for special field training.

"You sure you can handle this?"

Holdem
A wolf beastfallen and Headmaster Albus's manservant.

"I think I can manage a measly village inspection on my own..."

"Young man, is a mana merchant what you wish to be? Or do you wish to become a mage?"

"It's high time you started charging for your services."

Mercenary
A colossal carnivorous beastfallen and former sellsword, he now runs the only tavern in the village.

Zero
The Mud-Black Witch and author of the *Grimoire of Zero*. She also serves as proctor of the special field training program.

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KODANSHA

The Dawn of the Witch 2

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A VERTICAL Book

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KODANSHA

**The
Dawn
of the
Witch**

**The
Mana Merchant
and a
Premonition of Love**

“You sure you can handle this?”

In the face of Albus’s uneasy stare, Holdem gently raised his hands to reassure her. “I think I can manage a measly village inspection on my own. Or, what? You have some doubts about entrusting this to me?”

“I mean...” Albus hesitated. She did indeed have doubts—too many to count. “Look, Holdem. I trust you as best I know how. You’ve stuck by me for ages, and I know you’d never betray me. But I just...worry about you. You always act like nothing bothers you.”

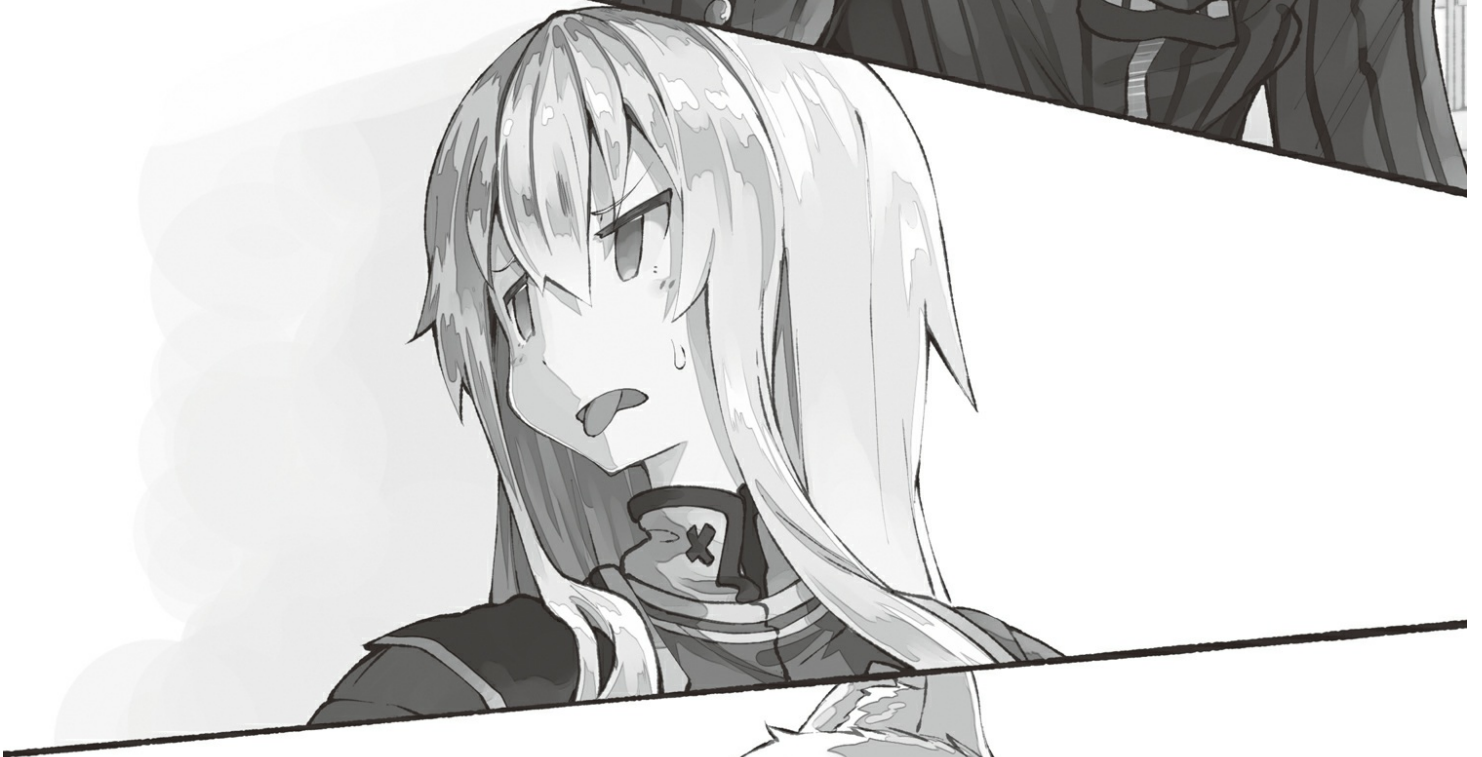
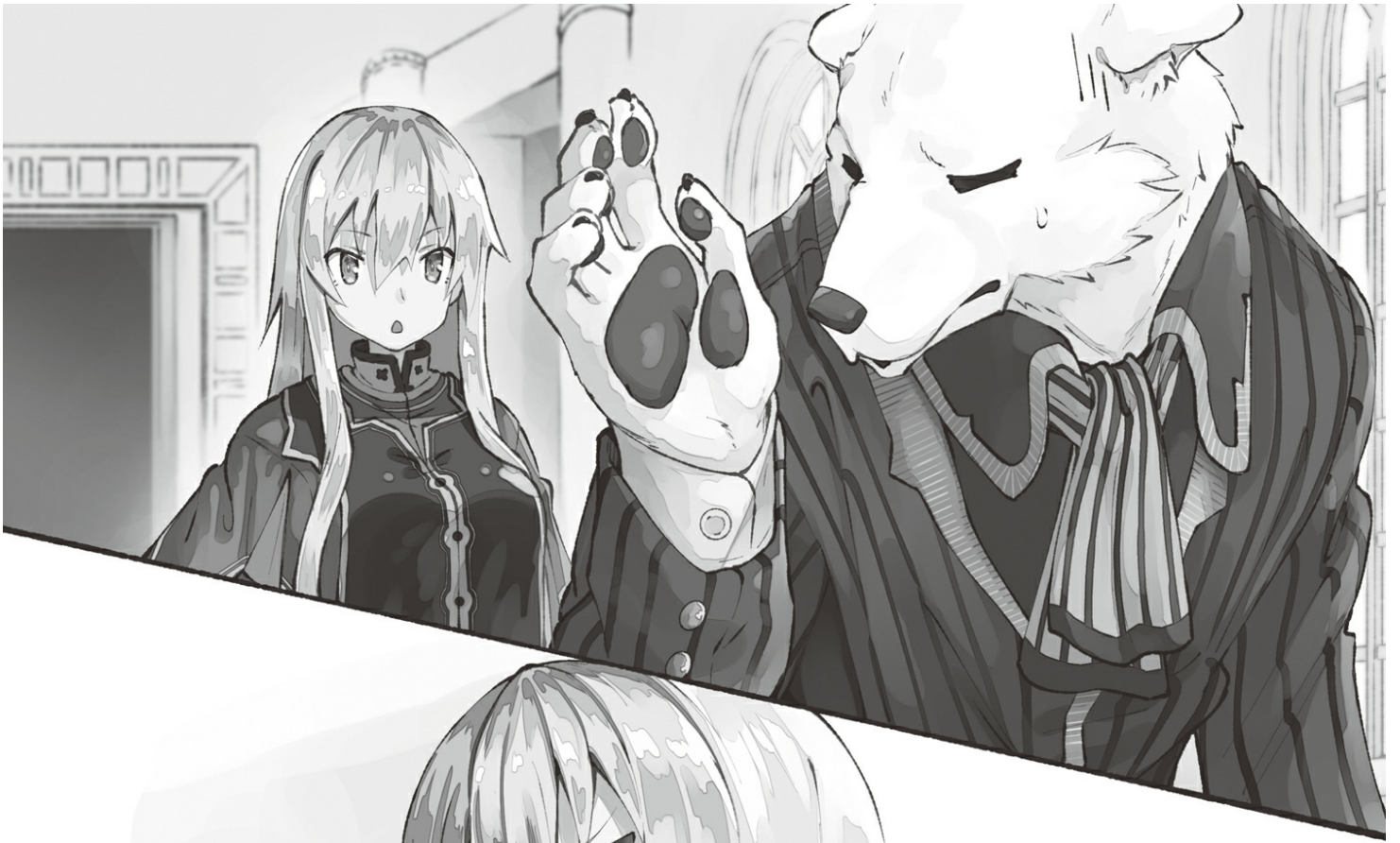
“You ill or something? You’ve never worried about me before.”

“Don’t try to brush this off, Holdem. Even I know it must be getting to you, all this business with Saybil.”

“He is Thirteen’s son, after all. That obviously hits home. If that bastard hadn’t shown up, you and me and Sorena would still be living out our lives in peace in that forest.”

Thirteen—by this name went the evil sorcerer who had brought magic to the Kingdom of Wenias, incited a civil war, and as a result destroyed innumerable lives. He’d likewise taken someone very important to Albus and Holdem: the great Sorena, an august witch of old who had kept the kingdom under her watchful eye for five hundred years. She was also Albus’s grandmother, and Holdem’s true master.

“But what’s that got to do with anything? You really think I’d strangle a kid to make him pay for the crimes of a father he’s never even met?”



“Honestly, I could see you doing that...”

Clearly crushed, his pointed ears drooping, Holdem turned away from the witch and waved an arm. “I’m gonna go. Can’t keep our guest waiting. Don’t even try to slack off while I’m gone—I’ve asked everyone to keep tabs on you so you don’t bail.”

“Hrn!” Albus stuck out her tongue indignantly.

Leaving the headmaster’s office behind, Holdem made his jaunty way to the horse-drawn carriage he’d left waiting outside and hopped in. There was already a passenger situated in the seat opposite—a hulking, muscular man wearing clerical robes...

“Hope you didn’t have to wait too long, *Tyrant*.”

“Like you give a shit,” the man spat, thrusting his handcuffed wrists toward Holdem. “So? What’s the job?”

“Shut your trap. Wait ’til we’re out of town,” Holdem growled icily, then signaled for the carriage to depart.



Chapter One



“Mornin’, Sayb. I’m gonna need another heaping helping of mana today, pleeeez!”

Hort shot out both hands, and Saybil casually took the left. A mere month earlier, he couldn’t even have imagined ever growing used to holding a girl’s hand, but Saybil now gripped Hort’s without hesitation. They were in a two-story wooden house in a small village, the first floor of which Saybil had converted into Sayb’s Mana Shop. The second floor featured three bedrooms, one each for Saybil and his two classmates from the Royal Academy of Magic. In other words, Saybil was living with a girl under the same roof. Not alone, of course, since their other male classmate was there too, but...

Saybil had expected more nervous excitement at the prospect, but as with the hand-holding, he grew surprisingly used to their cohabitation after about a week. Perhaps this was thanks to the harmonious way his own indifferent affect meshed with Hort’s frank, open nature and Kudo’s utter lack of tact.

Saybil’s palm tingled with the flow of magical energy. Slowly, carefully, he let the mana within him pour into Hort, like filling a bowl to the brim. As he did, her fluffy red hair stood ever so slightly on end.

Like static electricity, Saybil always thought.

“A-Ah... There it is! I feel it...! Oooh, I’m filling up...! I’m, like, kinda getting hooked on this...!” Hort trembled, eyes shut tight.

“Can’t say I get it...” Saybil released her hand—any more, and Hort could die of an overdose. “What’s it feel like to get magic poured into you like that? I know

Professor Los said it's pretty dangerous, but..."

Under normal circumstances, exchanging mana was one of the most taboo acts in the magic-using world. The reason: mana is an individual's life force, total depletion of which leads to death. This strict prohibition, which had existed since time immemorial, likely evolved to prevent mana theft from sparking war among witches and sorcerers.

Saybil, however, was the lone exception to this rule—his well of magical power was bottomless, and that being the case, it seemed safe enough to dole out small doses to mana-deficient mages. Which was how he now found himself sharing his power with Hort. Saybil's mere presence dramatically decreased the time it took for those around him to naturally replenish their mana supply, but that alone could not provide enough for a mage casting spell after spell for days on end.

"Well... It's kind of like a nice, frosty mug of ale when you're super thirsty...?"

"Sounds refreshing..."

"But, like, picture it being injected directly into to your stomach through a tube."

"Sounds like torture..."

"And you get the sense that one false step and *kaboom!* So I can see how some people might not love it."

"Yeah, people like me."

Focused on their conversation, Hort and Saybil hadn't noticed Kudo come down the stairs. A brief description of his scaly appearance would go something like, "Gah! It's a lizard monster!" But this clothed, bipedal "monster" was in fact a reptilian beastfallen, and their fellow student at the Academy of Magic.



Swishing his long, thin tail, Kudo jostled Hort aside and wordlessly offered Saybil his left hand. The mana merchant took it in silence and began gingerly pouring magical power into it.

“Ngh... Shit, this really does feel nasty...! Like somebody’s tryin’a stick bristlegrass into my veins...!”

“Huh?! Wait, has that happened to you before?!” Hort asked, aghast.

Kudo flicked a claw against her forehead. “It was a metaphor, dumbbo. Look—my veins are way too fine and delicate.”

The beastfallen held out an arm to show Hort, who immediately grabbed hold of it. “Hmm... They look about as thick as a flower stem,” she noted, scrutinizing his blood vessels in all seriousness. “I feel like you could get it in there if you tried hard enough—”

“Are you actually considering it?!” His scales blackening with terror, Kudo wrenched his right hand away from Hort just as Saybil released his grip on the left. “What? Done already?”

“Yep.”

“Ahem. You should thank me for distracting you!” Hort puffed out her chest with pride. Whenever she did this, Saybil felt a chill of apprehension: *Her shirt’s gonna bust wide open...!*

After living together for a month, the three mages had naturally settled into something of a routine. Without intentionally arranging it, their days had come to follow a regular flow. Saybil would rise first, get changed, and wait for his friends to come down for their morning mana top-up. Then Hort and Kudo would get ready and head off to work—Hort to the tavern to take care of any job requests that had floated in, and Kudo to examine patients in the neighboring

villages. Since both his roommates ate breakfast and lunch at their respective workplaces, Saybil would not see either of them again until after nightfall.

In their place, however—

“A merry morn to thee, Sayb! ’Tis another glorious day!”

—a petite witch burst through the front door with a loud *bang!* Luscious honey-blond locks, eyes that sparkled with every color of the rainbow, and a staff that towered precipitously over her doll-like figure identified her as none other than Loux Krystas, the Dawn Witch and sworn partner of the Staff of Ludens. She had also served as “temporary professor,” escorting Saybil and his friends from the Academy of Magic to the Witch’s Village, and the young mages had called her “Professor Los” ever since. Though her task had officially ended upon safely delivering Saybil, Hort, and Kudo to the village, the eccentric witch remained there simply because the prospect “promised to be fun.”

Brief greeting behind her, she bustled over to the table and hoisted onto it a basket brimming with freshly-baked bread. She then waltzed over to the countertop, humming as she brought the water to a boil, and poured *three* cups of wonderfully aromatic herbal tea. Only after she signaled by leaning her staff against the table did Saybil take his seat.

After deciding to run his business there, Saybil had rearranged the furniture on the ground floor somewhat, but the space had originally been a dining room, and still served admirably for that purpose. It helped that there were no customers to complain.

“Thank you for bringing breakfast every day, Professor Los.”

“And I thank thee for thine unfailing daily gratitude, young Sayb. Most admirable.” Los leaned over the table and approvingly patted the much taller

boy's head. Though to all appearances a young girl, Los was in fact an ancient witch with three centuries of life under her belt. For his part, Saybil was not so taken by the rebellious spirit of youth as to deny, out of some childish sense of independence, an elderly woman's wish to shower affection on a youngster.

"So? Hast thou become accustomed to life in the village?" Los asked, as if she was some kind of official village representative.

"Aren't you as new here as we are...?" Saybil shot back reflexively.

Bursting into laughter, the witch said, "I took to this village the very day I entered it! Never underestimate the itinerant Dawn Witch's ability to acclimate to any environment, young Sayb. Show me a den of thieves, and by sundown it shall be like as unto mine own abode! Wouldst not agree, little Ludens?"

The young mage's lips relaxed slightly at the thought of this petite witch, her voice brimming with mischief as she winked at him, lording it over a bandits' lair. The Staff of Ludens sent a long, spindly tendril slithering out from the black sphere embedded in its tip, and began draining the tea from its cup as if to say, *But of course.*

At first Saybil had shrieked with surprise—"Is that staff drinking tea?!" He'd since become desensitized to this and other such happenings, however, and now simply thought, *Obviously a staff is going to want its own cup.* The Dawn Witch Loux Krystas was an outlandish oddity who existed outside the bounds of all common sense. "Accustomed"—Saybil had indeed grown accustomed, though less to the village than to her enigmatic presence.

"I've acclimated, too... I think. Probably."

"What balderdash art thou spouting? The very idea is preposterous! How couldst thou have hoped to gain any familiarity with the village when dost

spend nearly every waking moment cooped up in this shop?”

“Ngh.” Her astute accusation almost made Saybil choke on his bread.

“In truth,” Los continued, “from the start I harbored some concerns regarding thy sociability, or lack thereof. And yet, not even I suspected thou wouldst refuse to initiate any and all interpersonal interaction... What, dost fancy thyself a noble lady awaiting an inviting hand at some grand ball?”

“No. I’m just a common apprentice mage hiding away in his shop...”

“Oh hoh? So dost grant that thou art a hermit-in-the-making?”

“I mean, there’s still plenty to do in here... Plus, you come to visit me, and I figured I might leave people hanging if I stepped out,” Saybil mumbled in his defense as he took a sip of tea. Saybil was, after all, the sole source of mana for every magic-worker in the village. What if Kudo or Hort ran dry and came to his shop for a top-up, only to find he wasn’t in? The thought left him paralyzed, unable to take even a step away from his post.

“Headmaster Albus has sent a few people all the way here to see me, too. If I weren’t here when they came—”

“Then they could wait! Consider for a moment, young Sayb, that before thou didst open this establishment, there were no ‘mana shops’ in existence. Anyone who has survived without thee thus far can afford to wait a few paltry hours!”

“But there’s so much to do,” Saybil countered. “Tidying up the rooms... Doing everyone’s laundry... Oh, and lately I’ve gotten really into blending my own teas.”

“Tidying? Laundry?? Such chores should be the responsibility of the individual! Wait, dost mean to say thou wastest young Hort’s clothing as well?”

“Yeah. Whenever I go in to clean her room, there are always dirty clothes

shoved under the bed. So I gather up what I can find and wash them for her...”

Los reeled back in shock.

“Professor Los?”

“A point of clarification, young Sayb. Has Hort asked thee to lave her laundry?”

“Of course not. But Hort and Kudo are both too busy to find the time, and the longer you let dirty clothes sit, the harder they are to clean, so...I just started washing their clothes with my own...”

“At which point young Hort began hiding her laundry?”

Saybil cocked his head. “I wouldn’t say she’s *hiding*—”

Abandoning the dramatic backwards tilt she’d quietly preserved, Los launched herself forward and clutched at the young mage’s shirtfront. “Canst not see she squirreled away her soiled garments specifically to obscure them from thine eyes, thou unbridled blockhead?!”

This time it was Saybil’s turn to reel back, away from the intensity of Los’s onslaught.

“But, Hort always thanks me for doing it...”

“Pray tell me, does she not then follow with, ‘But I can wash it myself, so don’t bother’?!”

“Amazing. You’re spot on.” Saybil gave her a round of applause.

“This is no time for approbation, thou...thou...! Ahh, ’tis no use. I cannot find the words to properly convey the extent of thy fatuity. Perish the thought of a young, tender maiden having a boy her own age launder the sweat-stained tunics in which she has toiled all day!! She is all but *bound* to loathe the

arrangement! What in the name of all that is good art thou thinking whilst washing her undergarments?!”

“I don’t know, like, ‘I wish I had soap that could get out these stains’...”

“Stains?! D-Didst just say ‘stains’...?!” Los trembled in horror.

At this point, Saybil also slowly began to feel he might have crossed a line he could never uncross. “I mean... Underwear directly touches your skin, so it absorbs sweat and stuff, and it stains easily if you don’t clean it properly. And some areas get extra sweaty, like your armpits, or in Hort’s case, under the chest...”

“Haaaalt! Thou must not utter another word, young Sayb. If anyone happened to catch wind of our conversation, thou wouldst become notorious among the ladies of the village as an aspiring sexual pervert!”

“For talking about laundry?!”

“Not simply any laundry! Thou speakest of a budding young lass’s freshly doffed knickers!” Los stomped on the floor to emphasize her point, at which the Staff of Ludens reached out to stroke her with a calming tendril.

While the staff rearranged her tousled hair, Los continued her probing in a slightly less frenzied tone. “Tell me, Sayb... I would hope I need not even ask, but—thou hast not mentioned this to her, hast thou? Certainly thou canst not have looked young Hort in the eye and...spoken to her of stains on her undergarments...?”

“Well, I told her I’d gotten them all out, but—”

“Goddess help me!” At this point Los collapsed to her knees with a cry. Such a prayer only passed the lips of a witch at the direst of moments. The Staff of Ludens followed suit, flopping onto the floor, where its black orb began to

writhe and twist.

“Ohh, Hort, thou pitiful antlered maid...! How could mine eyes have overlooked thy plight... I have failed thee—I am not fit to be thy professor...”

Los pitched limply forward from her position of prayer such that her forehead was pressed against the floorboards, with her arms splayed out on either side. This was enough to make even Saybil worry, and he tried to help Los to her feet, but the witch put up a hand to stop him.

“I am deep in thought at present, trying to discern how I might explain the essence of intersexual relationships...of romantic love, and gender...and of equality...”

“Is what we were talking about really that deep...?”

“O Sayb... What has young Kudo to say about all this?”

“About the laundry? He said it was a big help, that he really didn’t have time to wash his sheets and stuff. I think his exact words were, ‘Stay in your lane, asshole. I’m not some little kid.’”

“Then he does not appreciate it either!”

“He gave me some money, said if I’m gonna do the housework, he at least wants to pay me for it.”

“Honest to a fault, that lad,” the witch murmured, her expression troubled yet somehow proud. “Well, if he has paid thee for thine efforts, then he must not actually resent it. Wherefore, then, dost think Hort might feel such aversion to the idea? Though disgruntled, she does not outright refuse thee... Dost understand why, Sayb?”

“Huh... Umm... No, sorry.”

“For loooooove!” Los shrieked, then sprang to her feet, snatching up the Staff of Ludens and striking its tip against the floor in the same swift motion. Loux Krystas, the Dawn Witch, was nothing if not dramatic.

“Mark my words, young Sayb! ’Tis no exaggeration to say that a young woman’s cast-off vestments are an extension of her very body—an avatar, another self, infused with her smell, sweat, and sundry other elements! And whilst we’re on the subject, they’re extremely useful in divination!”

“Oh, okay... Good to know.”

“’Tis a testament to the intimate connection between the garments and the garbed. Imagine for thyself—would a chill not shimmy down thy spine if a hulking, boorish man were to suckle the briefs that mere moments ago didst bundle thy buttocks?”

Saybil tried to picture it, his face hardening as he realized it did in fact give him the willies.

But why? Once you take off your clothes, they’re just pieces of fabric. Why should it bother me so much? Maybe it’s like Professor Los said, that we somehow associate our bodies with them—or maybe it’s because we can tell that whoever’s handling them associates them with our bodies?

“Umm, so what you’re saying is that Hort sees me as a hulking, boorish man...?”

“Nay, nay...! Thou art headed in the correct direction—or perhaps I should say the opposite direction, where longing rules in place of repulsion, and so she fears thou mightst approach too near...”

“Huh... So she likes me, but she doesn’t want me to get close...?”

Saybil was completely lost. What most people considered common sense

baffled him. Common sense is, after all, based in accumulated experience. It's an awareness of which actions are more or less "normal," not some intrinsic instinct imparted at birth. And Saybil, for one, did not have a sufficient store of memories on which to build such insight. Three short years—and all of those lived within the confines of the Royal Academy of Magic—were all he had to go by.

Noticing Saybil's confusion, Los relaxed slightly and let out a sigh. She then plopped herself down on the long guest bench and patted the spot beside her. Saybil obediently sat down at the witch's side, only for her to sling her lithe legs onto his lap.

For a moment, he cringed. He did not appreciate the idea of having anyone, even a professor, put atop his knees the shoes with which they'd trod through the dirt. Upon closer inspection, however, he saw that the soles of Los's shoes were inexplicably spotless.

"Fret not, I had my little Ludens wipe them clean upon our entrance."

"Ludens really can do anything, huh?"

"Verily. I have my dearest to thank for styling my hair as well, I'll have thee know. A most dexterous staff indeed," the witch boasted. "Three centuries I have shared with this staff. There now exists nothing we do not know of each other."

"Wow..."

"Now, then," Los began, turning toward Saybil. "What dost thou know of young Hort?"

"Umm, she's a year above me at the Academy, she's especially good at attack spells... Turns out she was secretly a Church believer and a beastfallen..."

“Thou dost recite naught but facts, lad. No such list, however extensive, amounts to a knowledge of who young Hort truly *is*. For example, how would she react if thou wert to tell her, ‘You look cute’?”

Saybil cocked his head. “She’d say thank you?” *Everyone likes to be complimented, right? Plus, Hort’s really nice. She’d almost definitely thank me.*

And yet Los met this answer with a heavy sigh. Evidently, he’d guessed wrong.

“Then what’s the right answer?”

“Why, that depends on the situation, of course. Try whispering that to her in the privacy of the forest at night! Thou shalt leap several rungs up the ladder toward manhood!”

“So, I’ll become an old man?”

“Noooo-hoooo! ’Twas not what I meant at aaaall!” Los wailed, seemingly on the verge of tears as she thrust her hands into her long blonde hair and ruffled it in frustration. “Unhhh... Dear Ludens, I am a victim of my own pride... I detest common sense, yet here I was clinging to it, relying entirely on a convention known to all—all, that is, save young Sayb, who knows naught of love nor has a taste for its tales, nor even possesses any memories that might assist in comprehending the metaphor of the forest at night...”

“I’m sorry... I really don’t know much about much...”

Los shook her head gently. “No matter... Thou shalt yet learn. ’Twas I who was to blame for speaking in riddles,” she assured him. “Tell me, young Sayb—hast thou no vanity? No desire to show off? By which I mean, smoothing over this or that to sweeten how others perceive thee?”

“Umm... I feel like...maybe, but then again, maybe not...?”

“I, for one, have such vanity. I wish to appear beautiful, to be regarded as

clever. The Church would condemn mine inclinations as vainglory, yet that begs the question: wherefore are their clerical robes so dashing?! For good or ill, all who walk this world indulge in *some* degree of vanity.”

“Do they?”

“I swear, nothing ever elicits a reaction from thee!” Scrunching up her face, Los began petulantly poking the young man’s cheek. Saybil actually thought he’d reacted quite strongly—but it showed in neither his expression nor his attitude. Los’s face mirrored the consternation he felt.

“Away with that glum scowl, my lad. I meant it only in jest. Now then, to speak plainly, it seems young Hort fancies thee.”

“Well... I’m not...really sure...”

“I am telling thee, she does! ’Tis why she longs to shine beautifully in thine eyes, to whatever small degree! Thou dost not yet know her well. As such, she strives to reveal only her best qualities to thee. And yet, here thou art, scrubbing away at her soiled garments—the very symbol of her shame—which, at Hort’s tender age, not even family might be welcome to handle!”

“But...”

“Thou dost still protest?!”

“It’s not like there’s any point in trying to show off for a nobody like me. Plus, I’ve been doing laundry for years and no one has ever felt like that about—”

Los snapped to startled attention and began eyeing Saybil closely. The young mage stared back at her, wondering if he’d said something odd, then let out an “Oh.”

After a moment, he went on. “Wait... That doesn’t make sense. Everyone at the Academy washed their own clothes, so I can’t have been doing that, but...”

“Then thou hast...not, in fact, remembered something of thy past?”

Saybil’s shoulders sagged. “No... But, I just got the feeling that...it was normal to get assigned cleaning or laundry duty... Like it’s my job... I have to do it...and if I don’t, I...” The words spilled one after another from Saybil’s lips, spoken by a voice dwelling within the deepest reaches of his heart, which not even he had known existed. “...I get so scared.”

No sooner had he said this than Saybil’s heart twinged with pain. He pressed his hand against his chest. *Is it just me, or is it a little hard to breathe in here?*

“I see,” Los whispered, then slowly rose to her feet. Though exponentially shorter than Saybil, even she outmeasured the young man when he was sitting down. Los squared off in front of him and pulled his head down to her chest.

“P-Professor Los...?!“ *She smells so nice. Is it the tea? Or is it just her?*

“There, there. Good lad. Thou art a good lad, young Sayb!”

“U-Uhh... Thank you...?”

“Yes, a virtuous young lad thou art. However... Thy responsibilities lie not in cleaning or laundry. ’Tis true, one benefit thy profession provides is the ability to work from this shop, thine home. But dost thou truly have ‘free time’ to squander?”

Before Saybil could get out a *Huh?* Los quickly pulled away. “Hast not considered directing the time thou dost devote to cleaning and laundry to the practice of magic? Couldst not gain wisdom to supplement thy meager memories by apportioning the hours spent on housework to reading instead?”

“I mean... Of course I’ve thought about it, and I’ve been doing some of it, too, but...I guess I didn’t see the need to rush. Hort and Kudo are already helping the villagers, and I think I’m more cut out for a supporting role... I feel like I can

contribute more that way than by practicing my own magic...”

Seeing Hort and Kudo come home completely exhausted and collapse into bed had inspired Saybil to help however he could. And apart from refilling their mana, housework seemed like the quickest and easiest way to do so. If Saybil washed their clothes during the day, Kudo and Hort could sleep just that little bit longer. His job wasn’t physically taxing, and he could always take a nap if the mood struck, so he figured he could at least shoulder that portion of his friends’ burden for them.

“I thought it was the logical move. But if it makes Hort that uncomfortable, then—”

“Young Sayb.”

“Yes?”

“I am nearly out of my favorite tea leaves. Be a good lad and fetch some for me from the forest.”

“...Sorry?” *That came out of nowhere.*

Los pulled a single fragrant leaf out of a pantry drawer and handed it to him. “For comparison. Seek red flowers blooming at the base of a tree.”

“Wait, but... My shop...” Saybil protested.

“I shall attend it for thee. Or, what? Thou art willing to sacrifice thy time for Hort and Kudo, but not for me?”

Saybil frowned. “I only do those chores because my job keeps me in the house. If I go out, then it—”

“Nay, ’tis quite the reverse. Thou hast merely hit upon work to do here because *thou dost not venture out.*”

“...Huah?”

“Takest a stroll outside, young Sayb. Awaiting thy customers in this room, this house, this village—it makes no difference.”

“That’s totally irrational—”

“Forsooth, thy clients sometimes cross entire countries to seek thee out. Even shouldst secrete thyself away, in a settlement this small, thou wouldst be discovered in mere moments.”

And so it was that Saybil stepped away from (was driven out of?) his shop in the light of day for the first time in a long while. Having believed it his duty to always be there, despite the fact that no one had ever said anything of the sort, he now felt like a horse suddenly freed from its bridle. He had no idea where to go... So in that sense, he actually appreciated Los having given him a task.

Wait, do I really, though?

Saybil hadn’t actually wanted to leave his shop, so maybe it wasn’t gratitude he felt toward Los, but...

“Whoa! It’s you, Sayber! I hardly ever see ya!” A boy’s high-pitched voice rang out, stopping Saybil in his tracks.

“Ohh... Umm, you’re Uls’s son, uh...”

“Lai—o—sss!” Saybil’s faltering earned him a squinting glower from the not-quite-five-year-old boy. Uls was the village lumberjack, and Laios was his only son. He was the one who had led Saybil and his friends to the village when they’d first arrived. As the only child yet born in the community, and prematurely at that, Laios was somewhat coddled by the villagers. “This sure is a surprise. You almost never come out, Sayber. You working?”

"I guess. More like running an errand... I'm supposed to fetch more of these," Saybil explained, holding out the leaf Los had given him for Laios to see.

"Huh," the boy replied indifferently. "From where?"

"The base of a tree where red flowers bloom, apparently."

"Where's that?"

"Uh... You know, in the forest..."

"Where in the forest? By the river? Near the next village? Over by the cliff?"

"I, uh..." *Oh yeah, I didn't ask. I figured I'd find some if I just wandered around a bit, but maybe that was naive?*

"You don't know?! But you're a grown-up!"

"A grown-up..." *Right.* From Laios's point of view, Saybil must have looked old enough to count as a full-fledged adult. With great effort, Saybil rearranged his nearly immobile facial features into something bordering on dejection. "Yeah... I'm a grown-up, but I haven't got a clue..."

I just barely know where the river is, and I'm pretty sure the next village is that way, but I'd never even heard there was a cliff in the forest. And of course, I can't begin to guess where these red flowers might grow.

"Those are the leaves that smell nice, right? I know where they are."

"Wait, really? Where?"

"In the forest!" Laios flashed a broad grin, then suddenly sped off. Saybil stayed where he was, absentmindedly watching the child sprint away. Realizing this, Laios skidded to a stop and raced just as quickly back to Saybil. "Whatsa matter?! You need those leaves, right?!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

“And I’m gonna take you to ‘em! C’mon, hurry! If Papa sees me I’ll be in big trouble—so let’s move it!”

Big trouble? Saybil wanted to ask what he meant, but Laios had already dashed off again before he could. The young apprentice hesitated a few seconds longer, then concluded he couldn’t let Laios wander around the forest alone, and ran after him.

2

Are all kids this fast?

Saybil was a little dismayed. He’d assumed he could easily overtake the boy if he wanted to, but once they entered the forest even walking became difficult, what with all the branches getting in his way.

Saybil, after all, had no idea how to traverse a forest. Through brute force he managed to catch up, but no sooner did Saybil close the distance between them than Laios darted off ten steps ahead. And when the mage looked away for just a second, Laios scrambled up a tree and made it over to the opposite side of the bushes that blocked their path.

He’s really something. I guess you can’t assume someone’s weak just because they’re small.

Blissfully unaware of Saybil’s perturbation, Laios was excitedly giving a running commentary on everything he saw. “Look, doesn’t this black and white boulder look like Mercenary? Oh, and this mushroom’s poisonous. It’ll kill you, so don’t eat it. But if you get hungry, you can suck on the back of this flower. It’s sweet!”

“You know so much, Laios.”

“Sure do! My papa’s a lumberjack, so I come into the woods with him every day. Papa knows *everything* about the forest.”

“And that’s why you know where to find these leaves, huh?”

“Yep! Umm... I think it’s this way.”

Laios’s tiny frame slipped deeper and deeper into the forest. Saybil had long since lost track of which way they’d come.

“Laios, hang on a second. You’re gonna lose me.”

“Whaaa?” Laios came back, rustling through the underbrush. He popped his little head up over the bush between him and Saybil and gave the mage a disappointed frown. “This is nothing. My papa keeps up with me, no sweat.”

“That’s incredible. Uls is so much bigger than me...”

“I know, right? My papa’s amazing!” Laios giggled happily.

All of a sudden, however, something struck Saybil funny. “...*He* keeps up with *you*?”

“Hm?”

“When you walk in the forest with your papa, you lead the way?”

“Um... Well, sometimes.”

Laios quickly averted his eyes. That one tiny movement stirred in Saybil an inexplicable urge to study his surroundings. He’d unquestioningly followed Laios this far into the forest, but—something felt off. Saybil, an adult at least in terms of size, had had to struggle to make his way through the dense thicket of branches. And the tall grass displayed no sign of ever having been trod upon by human feet.

“Laios.”

“Uh huh?”

“...Are we lost, by any chance?”

Laios didn't meet Saybil's eyes. “N-No way!”

“Okay... But the visibility around here is pretty poor, so...lost or not, I feel like we should head back. Without some kind of tool to clear away the branches, I don't think I could go much further anyway.”

“But we're *this* close to those flowers you were looking for! I swear!”

“Uh huh, I know. But if we keep going—”

“You think I'm lying, don't you! It's true, though, it's just a little further!” Laios insisted. “I'll just go get them myself—you wait there!!”

By the time an *uh-oh* had crossed Saybil's mind it was already too late, and Laios had burrowed his way back through the bush. Saybil stood frozen to the spot, listening in a daze to the little footfalls scurrying further and further away. Then he paled and thought, *Crap*.

“Laios! Hang on, I'm coming with you—wait up!”

No answer came. Saybil would never be able to find the boy again if they got separated in these woods. What would happen if, worst-case scenario, the mage found his way back to the village alone, and Laios hadn't returned...?

“Laios... Laios!”

Saybil crashed through the thicket, sharp branches slashing his cheeks as he forced his way forward. But the dense foliage obscured his view, and he caught no glimpse of the boy.

I should've held his hand.

But the thought had come too late.

“Laios!” the young mage shrieked frantically.

Somehow, he managed to follow the track of broken branches and trampled grass, making his way further into the forest. Then, all of a sudden, the trail went cold. Saybil quickly looked up.

“...Laios.”

There he was, straddling a branch, his small arms wrapped tightly around the tree’s thick trunk. Saybil let out a sigh of relief. Then, in as calm a voice as he could muster, he called out to the little boy who still clung silently to the tree. “Laios, let’s head back for now. It must be past lunchtime already. Aren’t you hungry?”

“We can’t go back... I’m lost.”

So he was lost after all.

“It’s all right. I broke so many branches and upturned so much dirt on my way here that we can just follow my tracks back to the village.” *Probably.*

“...Really?”

“Yup.” *If we really put our minds to it, it...ought to work out.*

In truth, Saybil wasn’t at all sure it would. Still, he couldn’t exactly let Laios know that.

“But you’re mad at me.”

“I’m not.” That part, at least, was true. Laios had never known where he was going to begin with. Not realizing that, Saybil had followed after this little boy without a second thought and let himself be led into the depths of the forest. He was the one to blame.

“But I lied. The truth is, I dunno anything about where to find those leaves... Plus, Papa almost never takes me into the woods with him... He always tells me to stay in the village 'cos it's too dangerous.”

“Uh huh. I'm still not mad, though.”

“Why not...?”

“Because it's my fault.” At that point Saybil came to a rather unpleasant realization. “So, I expect...Uls is going to give me a real tongue-lashing...”

“What?!” Laios's eyes flew wide open. “Cos of me?!”

“No, it's not your fault. I'm the grown-up here. You're still just a kid, I never should've let you lead the way...”

“But I lied to you, Sayber... I thought...maybe *you* I could trick...”

Is that how he saw me? So sly for someone so small...

Saybil couldn't help but be impressed. He even felt some desire to emulate the boy, but that was all; no anger welled up within him.

“That's on me for letting myself get tricked, Laios. You're a kid. I'm supposed to be an adult.”

“But that's not fair...! I'll make sure I'm the one Papa gets mad at!” Laios passionately proclaimed. He found his footing on a knot protruding from the trunk and nimbly shimmied down branch by branch. “I'll tell him it's not your fault. I mean, you trusted me, Sayber.”

Kneeling down to put him at Laios's level, Saybil wavered for a moment, then patted the boy's head.

I'm not sure what to say.

From the other adults' point of view, Saybil was still a child himself, one who

might plead with them to trust him, too. And who might manage to gain their faith, fail in some way, and have to apologize. How would he feel if, in that moment, the adult in question gave in and said, “It’s my fault for trusting a child”?

And so Saybil simply picked Laios up and said nothing. This way, at least he wouldn’t lose the boy. The arrangement posed a new problem, however: with Laios in his arms, Saybil had a harder time retracing his footsteps. For starters, though, he had to resign himself to another battle with the wicked bush he’d overcome moments earlier, and the inevitable cuts it would leave all over his body—

“Hm?”

Feeling the hem of his pants catch on something, Saybil looked down.

“Whoa, it’s a mouse.”

The little rodent had bit down on Saybil’s pantleg and was tugging on it. Saybil lifted his foot to shake it off, but Laios cried out, “Lily!”

“Lily...?” *Who’s—wait, I think I’ve heard that name once or twice.* Saybil cocked his head, and an exasperated Laios rolled his eyes.

“Sayber, you don’t remember much of anything about the villagers, do you?”

“Uh, no... I don’t go out much, so...”

“It’s Lily, from the chapel!”

“Hrnh?” Saybil let out a sort of dimwitted grunt, then looked down at the mouse by his feet.

It does kinda feel like I’ve heard that name before, but then again...

“...Nice to meet you, Lily?”

“Nooo! That’s just a mouse!”

“Ah, thought so. Phew.”

“I meaaant,” Laios continued, smacking Saybil on the head, “the mice are Lily’s friends. Follow that one, Sayber! It’ll get us back to the village in no time!”

The mouse had not stopped pulling on Saybil’s pantleg. Surveying the area, he now saw several of its brethren scampering about where only seconds earlier he hadn’t seen a single one—

Saybil did as he was told and let the mice lead him back through the forest. Not only did they take him down paths easy for him to traverse, they occasionally even banded together to remove obstacles that blocked the way.

Mice are pretty clever, huh?

Saybil was impressed, and the feeling stayed with him until they finally stepped out of the forest.

“Are we...behind the chapel?”

The brand-new stone chapel popped into the apprentice mage’s suddenly open field of vision. The mice scurried on ahead, past an imposing figure who stood awaiting Saybil and Laios.

“Uh-oh! Mama!” Laios cried, trembling with fear.

Laios’s mother, every inch her hulking husband’s equal, had a truly commanding presence. The power of her irate fury, which could just as well have been described as bloodlust, made Saybil long to turn tail and run back the way he’d come. He took a half-step backwards, only to feel a hand clap him gently on the shoulder.

Saybil flinched and turned around to see the tall, wiry figure of the blind

priest, his lips tightly stretched into a smile so cold it bordered on a sneer.

“You must be tired from your stroll through the woods. It’s well past lunchtime, and I can hardly recommend going to the tavern just now. Come, we’ll prepare something for you at the chapel. We can have a nice long chat while we eat.”

There’s no running from this one.

Saybil prepared to breathe his last.

3

Realizing resistance was futile, Laios let his mother tuck him under her arm and carry him off. Saybil, on the other hand, followed after the priest—astonishingly sure-footed for a man whose eyes were covered by a blindfold—toward the chapel’s living quarters. A hallway leading from the sanctuary brought them to a door behind which lay the dining area. From the brief glance he stole, Saybil thought he spied a kitchen beyond.

“This is my first time in the chapel.”

“I imagine it is not unique in that respect. The list of buildings you have yet to visit in this small village must be rather long.”

“Good point...”

“Does it not interest you?”

“Huh?”

“The world.”

Saybil didn't know how to respond to such an unexpected question.

"Or perhaps I should say, 'other people.' In any event, take a seat. I'll have a meal prepared—Lily!"

Then it clicked: that was the same name Laios had mentioned. At the priest's summons, quiet footsteps pitter-pattered toward the dining room. A tiny—which is to say, no taller than Saybil's waist—child-like figure peeked out from the kitchen.

"Is that Lily?"

"Indeed. But... Lily. Why are you wearing your hood and cloak indoors?" the priest asked, furrowing his brow.

"Eep!" Lily shrieked in a shrill voice. Saybil couldn't even tell if this Lily, covered head-to-toe in a long cloak, face hidden beneath the hood, was a boy or a girl. The voice seemed to imply the latter, but that tiny stature could just as easily have belonged to a young boy.

"Um, well... Lily didn't want to startle him..."

"Startle away. Come now, take that off."

"No!" Lily turned away from the priest.

He raised an eyebrow. "Lily."

"I don't wanna!"

The priest took a step closer. A panicked Lily tried to scamper off, but, aided by who knew what magic, the very next moment the man had hold of Lily's hood. Before the little one could even cry out, he had whipped off the cloak.

"Wha... A mouse...!" Saybil exclaimed in surprise.

Lily, it turned out, was a mouse beastfallen, covered in fluffy white fur. She

had big ears, tiny hands and feet, and a hairless tail which was standing straight up in a threat display, no doubt thanks to her nervousness at being so suddenly exposed.

The priest nodded. “Yes, a mouse. Lily is a beastfallen, and she can communicate with the mice living in warehouses, woods, attics, and the like. Through them she can gather information, and occasionally I ask her to have them lead lost children out of the forest. As you saw for yourself today.”

“Noo! Nooo! Give it back! That’s Lily’s! Give it baaack!” Hopping up and down with both arms outstretched, Lily was making a huge fuss over her cloak.

Unmoved, the priest placed it on a high shelf. “Lily, prepare some food for our guest,” he commanded coolly.

The beastfallen pricked up her ears as she studied Saybil. “But...”

“He’s already eaten at Mercenary’s tavern. What objection could he possibly have?”

Owner of the only tavern in the village, Mercenary had gained his moniker from his former career as a soldier-for-hire. He also happened to be a colossal carnivorous beastfallen.

The priest’s argument made sense to Saybil. If the mage had already eaten meals prepared by one beastfallen, then he should have no objection to accepting lunch from another.

“But...Lily’s...*a mouse*,” she murmured in an almost imperceptible voice.

Letting out a small sigh, the priest turned to Saybil and asked, “Does that concern you?”

But the young mage couldn’t imagine what other objection he might possibly have beyond the fact that she was a beastfallen, and witlessly asked, “What do

you mean?”

“Do you not understand the question?”

“Umm... No, sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s better that way,” the priest replied. “That should be more than enough to satisfy you, Lily. Now go prepare lunch.”

Saybil had expected the priest to scold him, but the clergyman seemed surprisingly pleased with his answer. Lily, on the other hand, continued hemming and hawing as she stared at Saybil, his confused expression reflected in eyes that shone red as rubies.

“...Um, yes?” Saybil finally ventured.



“Mice...spread disease?”

“Ohh... True.”

“You still don’t mind?”

“But you can eat mice if you cook them, so...”

“Eep!”

“Ah, sorry. That’s not what I meant... But wait, so...you’re the one who does the cooking, Lily?”

She nodded, and Saybil turned to the priest.

“Yes?”

“I was just wondering if you cooked.” *Lily looks like a child, and a small one at that. It must be tough for her to even reach the kitchen counter.*

Saybil meant no criticism; he simply felt their respective roles seemed reversed.

“I wouldn’t mind, but—”

“N-No, you can’t!” Lily squeaked. “Father is sooo bad at cooking! Really! He’s awful!”

Saybil returned his gaze to the priest.

“...Yes?” His tone was slightly more acid this time.

“Oh, nothing,” Saybil demurred.

“Allow me to clarify. I am not a terrible cook. I merely have no interest in flavor.”

“Really?”

“I-It’s true! He, um, he doesn’t use any seasoning...! He grills meat, then eats it just like that! Only meat! It’s scary!”

“Is that really something to be afraid of...?”

“A product of my less-than-privileged birth and upbringing, I’m afraid,” the priest conceded. “Which is precisely why I’m requesting that you prepare a proper meal, Lily. I can’t very well grill a slab of meat and serve it to a guest.”

Lily gasped, seeming to suddenly remember what she’d been tasked to do, and scampered off into the kitchen. Evidently, her fear of offering a guest an unseasoned steak beat out her reservations about a mouse serving food.

“I wouldn’t mind some plain grilled meat...”

“Neither would I, were I eating alone. However, I *am* aware it would not do to serve a guest such fare. That said, we only have the leftovers from lunch to offer, so it’ll just be reheated soup, bread, and honey.”

“Honey?” Saybil repeated. “Isn’t that...super expensive?”

It probably doesn’t cost as much as sugar, but a luxury item like honey still isn’t something you get to taste every day. It’d make more sense in an area with lots of bee-keeping, but in a small town like this—

“We raise bees in the forest, so it costs us nothing.”

“Really? That’s amazing.”

“I suppose it is, though ours is a rather primitive system involving tree hollows. It’s also dangerous, which is why we warn the village children to stay clear...” The priest paused. “Speaking of which, Saybil, you and Laios very nearly trespassed into the bees’ territory.”

“Huh?” Saybil spluttered. “There was a bee colony...near there...?”

“You took an unusual route, so I imagine you missed the posted warning signs. Every adult in the village is well aware of it, however. At night wolves and wild boars also prowl the area. It’s why any child who tries to sneak into the forest alone gets a severe scolding.”

“I’m sorry... I...I didn’t know...”

“Ignorance is not a sin. Nevertheless, venturing onto unfamiliar ground without doing your due diligence is a suicidal act. It’s unspeakably rash. If venture you must, you should at the very least discover what you can about the dangers you might encounter—especially if you have a young child in tow.”

Saybil couldn’t argue with that.

“One might, of course, interpret this as a beautiful tale of how you took little Laios at his word, but...” Here the priest trailed off and turned his face to the ceiling. “Let me offer you a word of warning, not as the priest of this little chapel but as a former Dea Ignis Arbiter: ultimately, only you can protect yourself. In my experience, those who rely on second-hand information and neglect to conduct their own investigations end up deceived and dead nine times out of ten.”

“That’s a pretty intense warning...”

“For your edification, I was often the deceiver.”

“But you’re a priest.”

“I was not born one.”

So that’s what he meant about having a rough upbringing. Now that I think about it, Dea Ignis Arbiters were all chosen from the ranks of condemned convicts—in other words, criminals.

“Um, may I ask why you became an Arbiter?”

“No, you may not.”

“Sorry.” Argh, it’s so hard to know when I’m overstepping my bounds with people.

Just then, Lily came back into the dining room pushing a cart loaded with bread and a pot of soup, then arranged a single place setting before Saybil. The priest silently reached out his hand, into which the tiny chef placed a piece of fruit.

“Thank you. I’m sorry...you had to do this...all for me...”

“I was the one who invited you. Please, go ahead.”

Saybil gratefully sipped a spoonful of the soup, urged on by Lily’s cries of “Have some! Dig in!”

“Wow, it’s so good.”

“I am gratified to hear it.”

Chuckling bashfully, Lily scurried back into the kitchen.

“Now then,” the priest continued, “what enticed one so long confined to his home into the forest?”

Saybil stopped eating long enough to rummage through his pocket, then pulled out the leaf he carried.

“...Tea leaves?”

“You can tell?”

“By the fragrance, yes.”

“Professor Los told me to go pick some for her. She said I should look for red flowers blooming at the base of a tree.”

“And so you wandered into the forest without first establishing where they grew?”

“Yes,” Saybil admitted. “The thing is... Laios said he knew where to find them, so...” Though he was just telling the truth, Saybil felt like he was making excuses. It made him uneasy.

The priest drummed his fingers on the table. “And where would you have searched, had you not encountered Laios?”

“Umm...” Saybil tried to answer, but fell silent. He tried picturing what he would’ve done on his own, then realized he probably would still have wandered blindly through the forest. “...Honestly, I think I would’ve done the same thing even if I hadn’t run into him.”

“Quite likely. Most who come to a given conclusion would arrive at the same result even if they followed a different path. Of that you are self-aware, at least, which is a positive sign.”

“Haha...”

“By the way,” the priest began, biting into his fruit, “those leaves you seek grow near Zero’s shop.”

“Huh?!”

Zero was the name of the witch who lived near a lake on the outskirts of the village. The pioneer of the technology called magic, she was also proctor for the special field training program Saybil and his classmates from the Royal Academy were participating in.

“You might also stumble upon them if you meander around the forest long enough, but the most expedient course would be to visit Zero’s shop. Why Loux Krystas neglected to tell you this, I cannot say... Though I expect she hoped you

would ask someone in the village for help. Which you did, in the event.” The priest snickered. “Laios pulled the wool completely over your eyes, didn’t he?”

“Well... Yes.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you are missing more than ten years’ worth of memory. Memories are, in a word, experience, which means wisdom. Those with little knowledge of the world are easy to fool.”

“Apparently...”

“As such, unless you work to bridge that gap by studying harder and acquiring more experience and wisdom than those around you, you will remain a perfect mark, Saybil. If you had known that Laios does not venture into the forest alone, that Uls does not take his son into the woods, or where those leaves grow, this could all have been avoided. That said, I for one am glad such a mishap occurred sooner rather than later.”

Saybil cocked his head. Then, realizing the priest couldn’t see this gesture of confusion, he asked, “Why?”

“Recognizing the dangerous cost of blissful ignorance will surely motivate you to learn. It is never too soon to begin such studies. Or”—the priest suddenly stopped drumming his fingers—“do you intend to live out the rest of your life shut away in that shop, awaiting the day Zero declares that you have successfully completed the field training program?”

That was never going to work. Need would have undoubtedly forced Saybil out the door one day. This time, Los had asked him for tea leaves; no harm would come if he couldn’t get them. But what if it had been urgently needed medicinal herbs? And what if the one who deceived him had been a malicious foe, rather than an innocent young boy?

“...What should I do?”

“Hm?”

“The only thing I’m good for is helping other magic-users. What could I do in the village...?”

“For starters, how about you fulfill the task with which you were entrusted?”

Saybil looked down at the leaf in his hand. “Near Zero’s shop...you said?”

“Zero can surely give you the particulars, if you ask.”

“Thank you... Oh.” Saybil started to stand up, but then grabbed a hunk of bread instead. He drizzled honey over it, took a bite, then stuffed the rest into his mouth before rising to his feet. “Thank you very much for your advice. And for lunch.”

“My pleasure. You’re welcome anytime.”

4

“Huh?”

“Huah?”

Saybil left through the chapel’s rear door and went out into the backyard—where he ran smack into Hort.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what’s going on, Sayb?! You almost never leave the shop!”

“It’s kind of a long story, but...I wound up having lunch here...”

“Did Lily-bean make it? She’s such a great cook!” Then, with a goofy smile, she added, “I know it melts in your mouth, but you shouldn’t be walking around

like *this*.” She reached out a finger and wiped something away from Saybil’s lips.

“Ngh... Did I have something on my face?”

“Mm-hmm. Bread crumbs and honey, maybe?”

“Yeah, I was kind of in a rush.”

Saybil rubbed his mouth clean with his sleeve. After wavering for a moment over what to do with the honey on her finger, Hort fished a rag out of her bag and wiped it off. Though faint, there was blood staining the rag.

“Get hurt?”

“Hm? Ohh, yeah. Um... It wasn’t me though... It was Mercenary.”

“Mercenary...? Were you on a job together?”

Though he owned the tavern in the village, Mercenary had originally been a hired sword. Skilled at dealing with rough situations, he would still take up that sword if the need arose—or so Saybil had heard.

“Apparently, animals from the forest have been ravaging fields the next village over.”

“But... Animals you can handle on your own.”

“Sure... But, like, our village doesn’t have much in the way of larger-scale farming, so we rely on the surrounding communities for vegetables and grain and stuff, right? Which means that their problems are our problems, and we figured they’d be more comfortable if it wasn’t just an outsider like me coming to take care of it... But then we got attacked by a pack of wolves, and...I tried to cast a spell, but I couldn’t get the incantation out quick enough, so...Mercenary stepped in to protect me...”

For some reason, Hort’s bright and bubbly voice seemed to deflate more with

every word. “I couldn’t stop the spell, though, once I’d started...” Her gaze fell to the ground. “And it...hit...Mercenary...”

“What...?!”

“It was Steim, so he wasn’t hurt that bad, but...I got so upset, I couldn’t even cast any healing spells... Mercenary told me he was okay, but...then I got to thinking, what if it hadn’t been him...? I mean, with Steim, any normal human could’ve easily...”

Died. Steim was essentially a magical longbow with an unending supply of arrows, which could shoot down birds high in the sky or even pierce a bear’s thick skull.

The spell’s power depended on the caster, but unleashed with Hort’s skill, it could go straight through a person’s body.

“But...that’s not on you, Hort. Cancelling a spell is even harder than casting it. If someone steps into the line of fire, that’s their—”

“But what if I’d killed someone? Their family wouldn’t care about our technical troubles. All they’d remember is that a mage killed their loved one!” she retorted, more forcefully than Saybil had anticipated.

He took a step back. “Sorry. That was callous...”

“Ah... No, I’m sorry... I just...lashed out at you...”

So that’s why Hort’s here at the chapel so early, when she usually comes back past nightfall. She must’ve been too upset to work and gotten sent home. I hope Mercenary’s okay—

“Oh, right! That’s why I came out here—to get Lily-bean! The spell, it hit Mercenary’s shoulder, so...he won’t be able to use his arm today...and he wanted me to ask her to take over for him at the tavern...”

The words had barely left Hort's lips when a tiny figure shot out of the chapel and right past Saybil, slamming straight into Hort and wrapping its arms around her waist like a child.

"L-Lily-bean...?!"

"It's okay! Lily's cooking is much better than his anyway!"

"You heard all that...?"

"Mm-hmm. Lily's ears are real big." The beastfallen mouse flashed Hort her biggest smile, then took her hand and began to tug. "Lily will make you something tasty. You can eat it and cry. You'll feel better after you cry."

"But... Mercenary's the one who got hurt... I-I don't have any right to cry..."

"It's okay! He's super strong. His arm could get torn off, but he'd stick it right back on! And you know what? He let that arrow hit him on purpose! I just know it," Lily insisted, curling her hands into tiny fists. "He knew he'd be okay, and he cared more about protecting you! It's true! Lily knows!"

Hort's face crumpled and she bit her bottom lip. "But...But Mercenary was so mad...! He said I shouldn't have started the incantation if I wasn't going to get it off in time...! That I shouldn't use any spell I can't stop right away...! I don't think I'll make it as a mage...! It's probably for the best!"

Finally the dam burst, and Hort began to sob. Pulling her by the hand, Lily set off for the tavern. Saybil had no idea what the best move was in this sort of situation, but he did somehow intuit that it did *not* involve following after the two of them.

That said, it's not like I can stand around in the backyard of the chapel forever—

"Good gracious. Who would have expected thee and young Hort to chance

upon each other?” a voice called down from the tree above.

Looking up, Saybil saw a blonde witch sitting leisurely on a branch, an oversized staff resting against her shoulder as she swung her legs back and forth.

“Professor Los!”

“Indeed, ’tis I.” Los nimbly hoisted herself into a handstand, then swung herself around the branch once before sticking the landing directly in front of her ward.

“What are you doing here? Weren’t you gonna watch the shop for me...?”

“’Tis precisely why I have come! There is work to be done, young Sayb. Mud-Black calls thee to her shop—urgently.”

“Professor Zero?”

“Canst infer why? Mercenary requires healing after that bolt he took from Hort. Today of all days the village doctor and Kudo set out for a house call in the city, and young Hort cannot hope to help in her current state. Meanwhile, I have no magic and Mud-Black has complications of her own. She needs a mana infusion. Come now—let us make haste!”

A crisp slap on the back and Saybil dashed off beside Los. They sprinted straight to the lake on the village outskirts and practically dove through the open doors of Zero’s shop. The sickly stench of blood and burnt flesh filled the room. Saybil skidded to a halt. Before him, a stunning silver-haired witch stood soaked in sweat as she put pressure on Mercenary’s wound. The beastfallen lay limply sprawled on a bench, his own blood staining his white-and-grey fur red.

This looks so much worse than what Hort described.

Seeing Saybil’s shock, Los tapped her staff upon the floor to draw the others’

attention.

“Mud-Black, Mercenary—I bring you the mana merchant!”

“At last. Thank you, Dawn...! The moment my attention so much as slips, this one’s massive veins start spewing blood all over the ceiling...!”

“A hale and hardy heart can at times hasten one’s demise. Now, young Sayb—to work. Share thy mana with Mud-Black.”

“Oh, uh... Um, okay...!”

Saybil rushed to Zero’s side and offered her his left hand, as he always did with Hort and Kudo. Silently Zero clasped it in hers, then tugged—hard.

“Forgive me, young man—I’ll just need you for a moment.”

No sooner did an *Oh* cross Saybil’s mind than Zero’s lips were on his. Every blood vessel in his body tingled as a torrent of magical power surged through them and into her. It felt less to Saybil like dispensing mana than having it wrested from him—like the time he’d shared some with Los, but much more intense. Saybil’s eyes began prickling deep in their sockets, and he instinctively tore himself away. He stumbled back a few steps and nearly fell, but the Staff of Ludens in Los’s hand caught him just in time.

In a flash, Mercenary’s wound was closed, and Zero breathed a sigh of relief. Still stretched out on the bench, Mercenary cracked an eyelid.

“Was the kiss really necessary?” he asked sullenly.

Zero curled a finger and flicked it lightly against his head. “Jealous of the child who saved your life? Rather shameful of you, Mercenary. There is no need for such envy. *Our* kisses are treasures that bear no resemblance to this act of exigency. In fact, one could say ours are precious precisely because they are not driven by need, that they are sweeter and more sacrosanct—”



“I’m sayin’ don’t toy with the kid’s pure heart! Look at the poor little guy, he’s petrified.”

“Oh, no... That just surprised me... I’m all right.”

“Verily, Mercenary! What’s more, Sayb has already dipped his toes into such waters with me. Another splash would hardly fluster the lad!”

“Huh... Kids these days sure grow up fast... Back when I was a squirt... Or, up until I met the witch, really, I... Nope, not goin’ there. I’ll just get myself down,” Mercenary grumbled as he lightly rolled his shoulder around in its socket. Once he was sure his wound had closed completely, he dunked his hand into a wooden pail of water and pulled out a wet cloth. As he wiped his coat clean, he shot Saybil another look. “Well, that’s that... Thanks for comin’, mana merchant.”

“Oh, no... Just doing my job. But, um... Is it safe to move around so much already?”

“Never was that bad to start. But lose too much blood and it slows down your recovery time. Just wanted to get it closed up as soon as possible,” he explained, then muttered to himself, “Any longer and a certain someone woulda never gotten over it.”

“I would have preferred to treat it right away, but the constant lessons I’ve been giving the antlered one of late have drained my mana. I was not certain I had a sufficient supply left to seal the wound, so I conserved what I did retain and turned my attention to stopping the blood loss until our mana merchant arrived.”

“Wait,” Saybil began, the tension finally beginning to ebb. “Mercenary wasn’t in danger of dying, then? Phew. You looked so lifeless lying there, I thought for

sure—”

“Best thing to do when you need to minimize blood loss is lie down and close off the veins. It coulda been a lot worse otherwise. I might feel a little woozy the rest of the day, but that’s all.” Getting to his feet, Mercenary shook his head slightly and started mopping his own blood off the floor.

He’s so strong, was Saybil’s simple, honest thought. He sensed within Mercenary a tremendous natural resilience. *But, Hort still managed to hurt him—to make him bleed this badly.*

“...Excuse me, but what about Hort?”

“Huh?”

“Will she...get...expelled...or anything...?”

“The hell?” Mercenary’s ears perked up as he whirled around to face Zero. “Will she?”

Puzzled, Zero cocked her head. “Was this not self-inflicted?” she asked, returning his gaze.

“Well, I did basically dive into the line of fire.”

“Then I see no reason to expel her.”

“But,” Saybil continued, “Hort said Mercenary got really angry with her...”

“Damn right I did. If I hadn’t a been there, she would’ve gotten herself killed, and killed anyone else who mighta jumped in to save her. She took the beasts of the forest too lightly. And I, well, I took the little lady’s magic too lightly, too.”

“Took Hort’s magic too lightly...?”

“I mean, I knew I’d be out on the job with a mage, so I wore that consecrated cape for a little extra protection.” Mercenary glanced down at the cape lying on

the floor. It was drenched in blood, and had a gaping hole in it. “So, I never thought she’d get anything through that, ya know? Let alone all the way through my shoulder. I had half a mind to chew out that damn priest for givin’ me a lemon, but this witch here told me I woulda been a whole arm lighter if it hadn’t been for that thing.”

Saybil stared in astonishment at Zero, who chuckled grimly.

“I was taken aback as well. I merely gave her some instruction on how to utilize her magical power, but it’s safe to say the antlered one is no longer the same person who first came to this village.”

“Indeed. A true genius. Mud-Black and I constitute a similarly brilliant category of witch, of course, and yet...confronted with such prodigious talent, even we cannot help but marvel! If memory serves, young Hort was a promising lass even at the Royal Academy, was she not?”

“She was the top student in the whole school.”

“And no great wonder. Perhaps ’twould not be too soon to have her begin a regimen of practice in restraining her power.”

“Do me a favor an’ have her practice how to stop spells mid-cast, first. Even I might not survive next time.” Wringing out the blood-drenched rag, Mercenary flattened his ears against his head. “Anyway, this ain’t a case for expulsion. I did let the little lady have it, but only so she’d be more careful next time. I’m not the kinda warm-hearted soul that goes around lecturin’ people I’ve got no intention of workin’ with again.”

“Next time...” Saybil suddenly remembered the events of that afternoon. Laios had lied to the young mage, tricked him into following him into the forest, but only because the boy was afraid to explore the woods alone.

In which case, he should've just asked me to go with him. Then we could've made actual plans for where to go and probably had a better adventure.

Accepting without question was a sign of indifference. If all he cared about was not getting tricked next time, that was just another form of self-absorption.

—Does it not interest you?

The priest's words echoed in his ears.

I should've told Laios, too. Instead of just standing there like a statue, watching him as he left, I should've said, "Next time we go into the forest together, we'll make sure to do it safely and go somewhere more fun."

But it's not too late.

"Excuse me, um... I have to run. Oh, but first!" Saybil rummaged through his pocket, then handed the leaf to Zero. "Um, it looks like we're almost out of this kind of tea, so please share some with Professor Los. Could we consider that my payment for this mana session?"

"I...would not object, but..."

"Great! Okay then, let me know if you need me again!"

With that, Saybil dashed out of Zero's shop.

The remaining three watched bewildered as Saybil rushed off, then

exchanged glances with each other.

Zero broke the silence. "...A question, Dawn."

"Yes, Mud-Black?"

"If I'm not mistaken, didn't you harvest a bushel of these tea leaves from the forest just the other day?"

"I've drunk them all up! 'Twas too tasty to stop!" Los waved her arms about wildly as she sang the praises of the wonderful tea. She soon succumbed to Zero's cold stare, however. "Though I do have perhaps one month's supply left. I merely wished to give young Sayb cause to visit thee. Both Kudo and Hort come freely for guidance, but Sayb has not ventured to do so even once, has he? In that brief interval, a yawning gap has opened between them. If matters are left unattended, it shall only grow the wider."

"And what would be the problem with that? We all walk this life at our own pace. There's no need to spur the young man on simply because the other two gallop ahead."

"In general, I would concur. However, my opinion is slightly different when it comes to young Sayb."

Zero raised an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

"The lad is too giving and self-sacrificing. He unconsciously feels 'tis wrong to put himself first and pour his heart into his studies, to race ahead and surpass his classmates."

Zero furrowed her lovely brows as she looked back at Los, then turned her confused gaze toward her beastfallen companion. "...Mercenary."

"Mm?"

“I cannot seem to grasp what the Dawn Witch is saying...”

“Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Yet *you* understand?”

“If she’s talking about an inferiority complex, then yeah, I’ve got some idea. What it boils down to is ‘who gets the most to eat.’”

“I’m listening.” Zero shifted to face Mercenary as she had Los a moment before.

The Dawn Witch watched her, smiling inwardly. This was a witch of rare genius with over a century of lived experience. And yet, she was nothing like the cold-hearted and arrogant sorceress Los had imagined the creator of the world-altering practice of magic would be. To Los, she appeared as a naive young lass not so unlike Saybil, who had no memories to his name.

“Okay, look. There’s three of us here, right? Now say we’ve got four portions.” Mercenary grabbed an apple from the dining table, then took a knife in hand and dexterously sliced it into four chunks. “Who do you think should get to have this left-over slice?”

“I will eat it.”

“I’m not askin’ if you *want* it, you hungry, hungry witch. Think it over, seriously.”

Pouting, Zero considered Los, herself, and Mercenary in turn.

“Hmm. After pondering the matter deeply, I’ve reached the same conclusion: me. I have just cast a spell and exhausted my energy, after all.”

“So you wouldn’t give it to me, even though I’m recovering from a wound...? Well, that’s fine. Hey, Granny. How about you?”

“A fine question. For my part, I have no need for it. Perhaps you two could divide it amongst yourselves? I have done no work to speak of, nor am I injured or in need of mana. It seems only fair that this wizened old witch abstain, and allot my portion to you two youths, bustling about in the prime of life.”

Mercenary snapped his fingers.

“There it is.”

“Aha,” Zero clapped her hands. “I see it now, Mercenary.”

“Well?” said Los. “Rather impressive acting on my part, wouldst not say?” The Staff of Ludens stretched out a tentacle and patted the preening witch’s head approvingly.

“No, wait. Something still doesn’t add up.” Her expression troubled, Zero reached out and popped a piece of the apple into her mouth. “The more you eat, the less fruit you have, but knowledge is not a zero-sum game. The lizard and the antlered girl do not gain anything by the young man holding himself back. He need show no restraint.”

“And if young Sayb were pouring his energy into cleaning and laundry? Wouldst still hold to that?”

Zero’s jaw dropped and she rose to her feet. “Do you mean to say the young man is sacrificing his study time to engage in such labor? In order to give the other two a greater chance to learn?”

“In brief, yes. He feels no urgency to advance in his own studies, and believes a supporting role suits him best. He says that since his classmates are already assisting the village, ’tis the most logical division of labor.”

“How can he be so complacent...?! If they need such assistance, we should hire a professional. That is not work for the young man to undertake, even in

service of others.”

“So one would think! Alas, even if thou wert to command young Sayb to put himself first, he would do no such thing. He cannot. And so, whatever other course we decide to take, I deemed it meet to first push him out into the world. Thus I hit upon the notion of sending the lad to thee on an errand. I must admit that things turned out just a hair different than I expected... But in any event, he seems to have taken an interest in the goings-on outside his doors, and that is a promising sign.”

“Should I assign him schoolwork? And have him come here for lessons on a set schedule?”

“A valid option, yet I fear he would merely sacrifice his sleep... The desire to learn is and always has been driven by a thirst for power. However, Sayb knows too little of the world to thirst for anything—his memories have, after all, been sealed away.” Los tapped a finger against her temple. “And yet, return those recollections to him and the lad shall find it difficult to maintain this life. Fragments of that hidden history will horrify and hamstring him.”

“Why doncha just threaten him with a little expulsion, then? Tell him to get it together or you’ll toss him out. He’ll feel the burn then.”

“But Mercenary, the young man’s achievements continue to accumulate by the very fact of his existence alone. With his unique and unparalleled ability to dispense mana, he is already contributing more than his share to helping this village.”

“Contributions that nonetheless stimulate no growth in the boy himself,” Los pointed out.

“Hmph,” Mercenary grunted. “Not exactly my wheelhouse, but doncha go to

school to *study*? If he's got no mind to learn, why don't you just kick him out and have done with it?"

"Aaargh! How I loathe such cynical, unfeeling, astute analyses! Dost thou wish to drive young Sayb away?"

"I wouldn't say that, but...the witch here put him in the Academy of Magic 'cos she thought he'd be happier as a mage. If he's not into it, though, what's the point in putting him to all that hardship? If all he wants is to live out his life as a mana merchant, then the witch and I can take him in after he gets expelled."

"Hnngh!" Los groaned, then abruptly threw herself on the floor. "No! No! Nooo! I would watch my fledglings grow! I yearn to see young Sayb and Hort and Kudo become incredibly awesome mages, and shake the foundations of this accursed world!" Los flailed her limbs about, wailing like a child. "What if, when presented with the option, the lad simply said, 'Okay then, I'll take expulsion and life as a mana merchant, please'?! I cannot abide the thought of such a dull denouement!"

"You should at least let the kid choose how he lives his own life... Anyway, I need to get back to the tavern. Witch, Granny, what about you?"



“Then I shall—” Zero took a step forward, but Los raised the Staff of Ludens and blocked her path. Zero looked back and forth between Los and Mercenary. “—not join you at present, as it would seem we have a private matter to discuss. Go on ahead, Mercenary,” she said, smiling at the giant beastfallen.

Mercenary’s ears pricked up, and he cast a suspicious glance at Los. “Fine, if you say so, but... Listen up, Granny. Don’t go bullying my witch, ya hear?”

“Whaaat?! Arggh! Exploit me not as a pretext for thy flirtations! When, pray tell, have I ever maltreated Mud-Black?!”

“Just a friendly reminder not to start now.”

Mercenary poked Los lightly in the forehead with the tip of a claw, grabbed some fresh clothes from the dresser and swapped them for the blood-stained ones he wore, then left for the tavern.

Los furrowed her brow slightly. “...And wherefore might Mercenary keep a change of clothes in thine establishment, Mud-Black?” she asked.

“He stays over rather often.”

“And wherefore might that be? He has his own abode.”

“Is that what you kept me here to ask?”

“Nay, but the shock is so great as to push my original intent from my mind! How serious are things between the two of you? Are you wed?”

“I would love to tell you in detail, but not as much as I wish to catch up with Mercenary. Pray make this brief, Dawn.”

“My, my, so hasty. But never thee mind—rejoice in my pardon! I have a great love of frankness. I wished to speak of thy depleted mana.”

“Oh?” Zero responded. “By extension, then, you mean to discuss the young

man's mana merchanting?"

"Indeed, indeed. I have a great love of the sagacious—our chats are a true delight."

"I find them rather dull."

"Oooh! I'll brook none of thy sass, child! Now let me come to the point! Why didst thou not take a larger portion of mana just now? 'Twas only what thine healing spell required, no?"

"Why should I take more than necessary? I wished only for enough to treat Mercenary's wound. Nothing more, nothing less."

"I do not understand."

Los held the Staff of Ludens parallel to the floor at about the level of her bum, then sat down on it. Any normal staff would have fallen to the ground, but the black orb embedded in the Staff of Ludens sent out black tendrils to serve as "legs," creating a makeshift bench.

Zero sighed at the sight. "Will this take long?"

"That will depend on thee."

Zero begrudgingly dragged a chair over and took a seat. Tilting the chair on its hind legs, she rocked back and forth. "So?" she prompted. "What do you not understand?"

"Didst thou not think to secure enough mana for perhaps ten spells? Hort and Kudo, not to mention young Sayb's other clients, all accept as much as they can possibly bear. Why didst thou not?"

"Because I am a bottomless pit."

"And yet, thou *hast* reached the bottom."

“Yes—I’ve run dry. And it was only when I did that I first discovered I had such limits. Which means the young man’s mana might also have a limit—one we cannot now see.”

“In that case,” Los continued, “why didst thou allow young Sayb to establish himself as a mana merchant at all? Wherefore didst not stop him?”

“Because the amount of mana the average mage can store is inconsequential. As far as I can tell, it appears that the young man’s reservoir begins to refill itself the instant he draws from it. It is as if he were scooping teaspoons of water from a waterfall, so to speak.”

“Yet if *thou* wert to ask it of him, such a teaspoon would not suffice?”

“Most likely not.” Zero shook her head. “I have asked him to spare me mana on several occasions now, but...each time he instinctively fears to do so—with me as with no one else. Did you not see him jump back in fright today?”

“More to do with that unexpected kiss, I’d warrant.”

“I do not think he’ll be able to share mana with me by hand alone any longer.”

“...How now?”

Zero shrugged. “Picture a tightly sealed bung on a barrel of ale. Whenever he touches me, the young man restrains the flow of mana so as not to accidentally dispense too much, but he does not know how to loosen that valve. That is why I thrust my tongue into his mouth.”

Mana was said to dwell in the heart. As such, when taking magical power, the most basic approach was to grasp the victim’s left hand, the one closest to that vital organ. The proximity of mucous membranes to the blood vessels made them useful when greater efficiency was required, however. And the most effective route was to grasp the heart directly. When offered as a sacrifice, the

beating heart of a great witch could empower sorcery devastating enough to demolish the entire world.

“Listen, Dawn. You asked why not enough mana for ten spells? Because to receive that amount of mana from the young man would now require an extraordinary effort on his part. It would be akin to asking him to put his head between the jaws of a starving wolf, then telling him, ‘Do not fear, it won’t bite.’ The young man would likely oblige, but not without enduring unbearable fear and pain.”

“Then,” began Los gravely, “knowing this, why...why, at an earlier moment, didst thou not...” *take enough from the lad to satisfy thee?*

Zero answered the unspoken question: “Magical power is to a mage his life, his very potential. I could not in good conscience say, ‘I don’t have enough, so share with me half of yours.’ I could not even begin to calculate the irredeemable harm that would inflict on him.”

“I cannot say I fully comprehend, perchance because I am a witch without mana of my own...”

“Would it be easier to imagine in terms of coin? You would not demand that a wealthy person hand over half their fortune merely because they are wealthy.”

Los laughed. “That would indeed be an absurd request.”

“For you, perhaps, the relevant equivalent would be time. I wager you would not relish being told to spend a hundred years toiling without compensation simply because your life will continue forever.”

“Indeed no. Yet I might offer it of my own accord.”

“And would you accept the same, if proffered by your only living kin?”

Los put on an obvious show of considering the question, then chuckled. “I

dare say I would not.”

“Above all else, I am proctor to those three, and as such hold their future in my hands. An entreaty for assistance from me is tantamount to exploitation. Listen, Dawn. I understand why you might doubt me. Unless I’m mistaken, you have heard, haven’t you?”

“Heard what?”

“What the young man’s father—my brother, Thirteen—did.”

“Hmph,” Los snorted. “Well, yes. Rumors, at least,” she replied. “He went about slaughtering witches who opposed him and siphoning the mana from their corpses, is that right?”

“Yes... He was a wicked sorcerer. He tyrannized and ran roughshod over others in pursuit of his own ideals, transgressing every possible taboo without a second thought. Thirteen would not have hesitated for a moment before plundering the young man’s mana. And yet, wicked though he was, I still cared deeply for him as one of my brethren. Nevertheless,” Zero continued, “that young man is the one and only nephew I will ever know. I pray you do not suspect I would steal his future or his magical power.”

Los shook her head. “No—no longer. Thou wouldst have already done so, if that were thine aim. My concern is for thee, Mud-Black.”

“Me?”

“Thou shalt grow old and wither away. Dost not grasp the meaning of this?”

“That is the normal way of things, Dawn. Just as a mage will run dry of mana after two or three spells, people naturally age with the passage of time. I do not bemoan that fate. Nor do I fear it.” Zero smiled. “I may grow old, but I will always be beautiful. And Mercenary’s love for me will only deepen. I will age

and wither with the one I love. It is a fate much preferable to being left alone.”

“Gaaaaah!” Los screamed, and toppled backward off the Staff of Ludens.

Zero sprang anxiously to her feet at the witch’s sudden somersault. “Dawn! Wh-What happened?! Such sudden—”

“I took an arrow of exaltation to the heart...”

“...Huh?”

“This world is bursting with love... Ohhh, Mud-Black...! I shall see thy love through to its end!”

Zero immediately let go her supportive embrace, and Los collapsed in a heap, hitting her head against the floor. She cried out, this time in genuine pain, but Zero was already on her way out the door.



Chapter Two



“Who’s next?!” Kudo screamed, leaping up, only to realize to his great consternation that he was in his own room in the Witch’s Village.

I don’t remember coming back here.

They’d begun to call him “Doctor Magic” at the local clinic, and even in the surrounding settlements people now welcomed his visits with open arms. Then the doctor from the village clinic had asked him, “Would you care to visit the city?”

Kudo had accepted on the spot.

So he’d gone—and discovered that the laborers living in the city’s slums were all suffering the same symptoms. It was an epidemic. Unable to afford medicine, the afflicted feared they would lose their livelihoods if they could not recover. Magical treatments, on the other hand, cost no money...though you could say that they came at the expense of Kudo’s life.

“What’s our most prudent course of action?” the doctor had asked. “I can’t claim to know much about how magical healing works. I *have* heard of a woman, a healing saint, who lives in the Republic of Creon, but—”

“Who cares about prudent,” Kudo had retorted. He would just heal every single patient, and that would be that. Treatments relying on medicine were dated as hell.

With that, he had set to work—only to find himself here. He left the bedroom with a shake of his head, and saw Hort and Saybil in the living room below.

“Oh, Kudo! Hooray, you’re awake!” Hort waved her arms wildly. “You owe the doc a big thank you, you know. He gave you a piggyback ride *all* the way home after you passed out!”

“Passed out?”

“From mana depletion. He said you tried to heal thirteen people all in one go?”

“Ahhh... Yeah...” Kudo cradled his head. “Did he say how many I got through...?”

“Umm... Eight, I think?”

“That’s what the doc said,” Saybil agreed. “He apologized to us, said he should’ve stopped you sooner.”

Kudo fell into a crouch halfway down the stairs. “So...frikkin’...laaaame...” *After bragging I could handle all the patients and barking at the village doctor to keep his hands off, I went and passed out... Then the guy I’d been such an asshole to carried me all the way back home?* “And what, you refilled my mana for me?”

“Yeah. While you were sleeping.”

“I’m goin’ back to the city. Gotta finish treating everyone... That disease spreads like wildfire. If I don’t heal ’em all in one go, the ones who recovered are just gonna get sick again.”

“Hm? But...” Hort cocked her head. “The doc said it was all taken care of. That he’d given the others medicine.”

“But they couldn’t afford that!!”

“He said they could pay in installments,” Hort explained. “That’s why they

called for him in the first place, since the doctors in town wouldn't accept a payment plan... But shouldn't you know that, if you went with him?" She cocked her head even further.

Kudo didn't answer. Even if his big mouth (which already ran from ear to ear) got even bigger, there was still no way in hell he'd ever fess up to the truth: that he'd refused to get an explanation from the doctor, and just said, "Magic can cure anything, so don't bother me with the details."

"Plus, it's already nighttime," Saybil added. "Doesn't make sense to head for town on your own at this hour."

"Just shut the hell up, I get it already! I'm starving!" Kudo snapped.

Hort stood up with a grin. "I thought you might say that, so I brought you some bread!"

"It's a shame, Kudo. If you'd come back conscious, you would've gotten to try the dinner Lily made."

"Lily?" Kudo repeated dubiously. "You mean the church mouse? You sayin' that little thing...cooks?"

"It surprised me, too. I mean, she's so tiny."

"Back up, why's *she* makin' the food? Did old man Mercenary kick the bucket?"

"Hngh...!" Hort clutched her chest and doubled over.

Saybil gasped, then clapped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry, Hort, I didn't mean to bring it up again..."

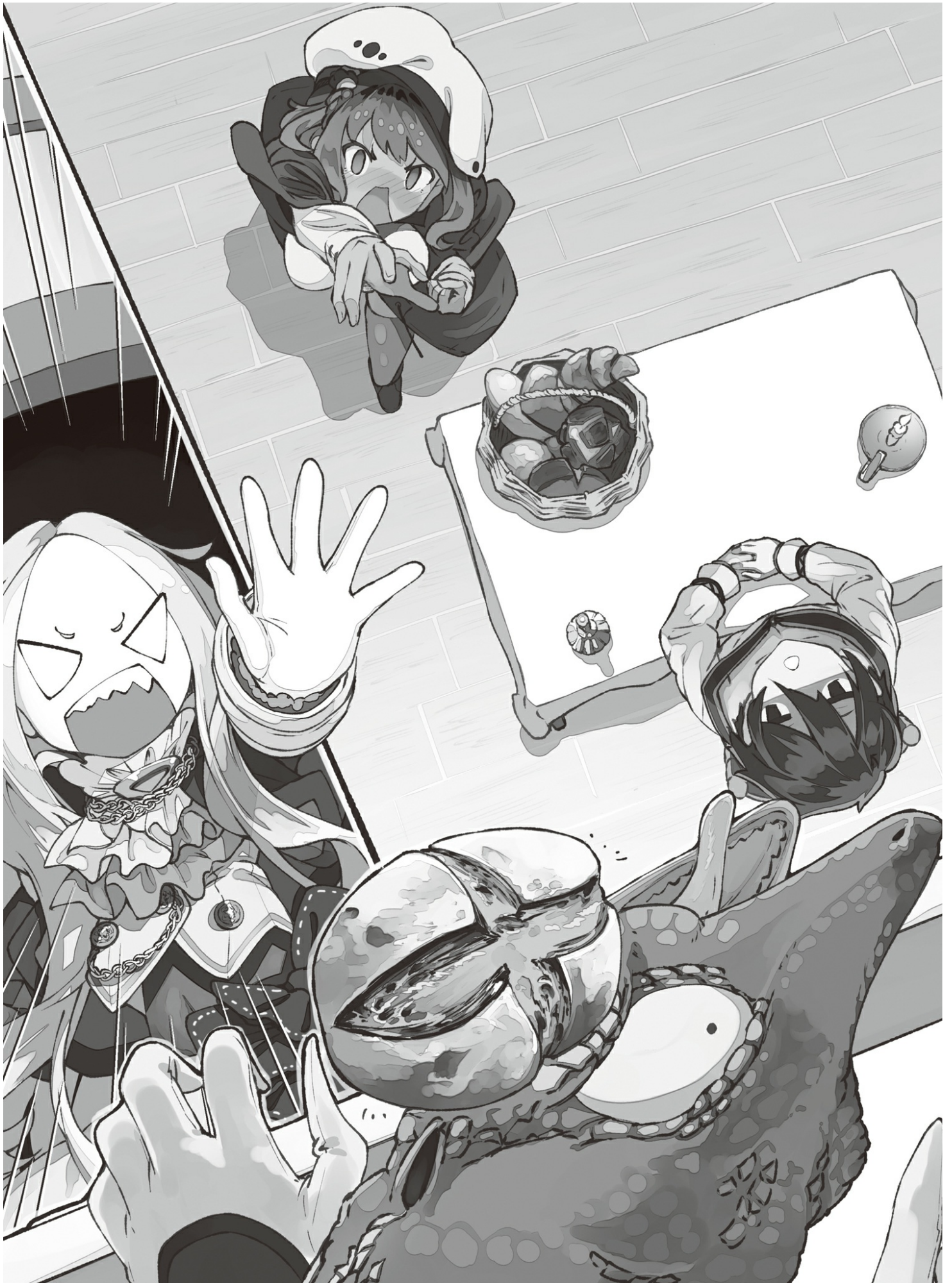
"I-It's fiiine, Sayb...! It's my own fault...that...that Mercenary..."

"You killed him?!"

“No! I just hit him with a little spell!”

“So you *tried* ta kill him?!”

“Ughhh, shut up! Stuff this in your mouth and choke on it! Go on! Eat up! You no-mana glorified gecko!” Blushing bright red, Hort chucked the loaf of bread at Kudo.



“Whoa, that’s hilarious, Hort. I thought I was about to do a spit-take, it’s so funny,” Saybil complimented her, completely deadpan.

“G-Glorified gecko?!” Kudo stood up, leaned over the railing, and barked, “You’re both dead meat! I’m gonna kill you like you never been killed before!”

“Enough! Shriek no more unsavory death threats at this ungodly hour! The neighbors will be quaking with fear!”

Los’s explosive entrance, very nearly kicking down the front door, brought the ruckus to a screeching halt.

Or it would have, but Kudo was already too far over the railing; he lost his balance and landed with a crash on the floor below. From his hands and knees, he looked up at Los. “Wh-Why the hell are you here...?! You come to lecture us? Is that it?”

“Ughhh... We *were* all pretty awful today... Sorryyyyy.”

“Yeah, I really made a nuisance of myself over at the chapel. Guess I do deserve a scolding, huh...”

Los looked somewhat deflated at the sight of her three students preparing themselves for the worst, each in their own way. “What’s this? You all seem perfectly contrite. ’Tis but a waste of time to lecture the remorseful. Now, how do each of you intend to redress your missteps?”

The three apprentices exchanged glances.

First up, Hort squared her shoulders and said, “Um! I—um! I know, I know! I’m going to learn how to properly control my magic! And I won’t cast in the field

again until I'm sure I can stop any spell that looks like it might get out of hand!"

"Excellent! Now there is a pronouncement befitting a star pupil. Let us push on! Next, young Kudo."

"I'll take Saybil with me to work."

"Huh? Me?"

"As long as you're around, I can heal as many sick or wounded people as I want! It's about time you left your lair and came back to the outside world!"

"That does not solve the fundamental issue! Try again!"

"*Bleh.*" Kudo stuck out his tongue.

"In fact, I do not appreciate thee depending so heavily on young Sayb for mana. Now thou hast the benefit of a friendly discount, but by rights his services would fetch inordinate sums from the greatest witches of old!"

"Huh... Where'd that come from? You never said anything before..."

"Precisely why I deemed it best to nip the habit in the bud right now!"

"But, I mean, I *do* totally depend on him..." muttered Kudo. Then, after considering the question for a minute, he cautiously offered a suggestion. "All right, how 'bout this: I'll treat the patients who need urgent care with my magic, and leave the rest to the doc... How's that sound...?"

"Division of labor, is it? A decent proposal. However, canst thou make such determinations? Canst identify the vital sections of the body, or which must be prioritized? Or more fundamentally, canst even diagnose which areas require attending to?"

"Well, I mean... If I consult with the doc..."

"If dost *seek his guidance*, I think thou meanst! 'Consult,' my foot! Save thy

pretensions until such time as hast become a professional in thine own right!”

“Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up! I ain’t a fuckin’ glorified gecko!” Still on his knees, Kudo slammed his fist against the floor. Los hadn’t said anything about the last bit, but Hort’s earlier taunt seemed to have struck a nerve.

“And? What of thee, young Sayb?”

“Oh, right. I promised Laios I’d go into the forest with him tomorrow. I asked his parents for permission and everything. So... Professor Los, would you mind watching the shop for me again, just for a little while?”

“Hnh... Well... I suppose that might be a fitting start for thee... Very well, go and frolic to thine heart’s content.”

“Thank you—”

“On one condition.” Los suddenly thrust the Staff of Ludens at him, and Saybil braced for the worst. “A mere stroll through the woods cannot be considered a proper activity for a student of the Royal Academy of Magic. If the forest be thy destination, I would have thee harvest medicinal herbs. They must have taught some herb lore at the Academy?”

“Yes, they did. Mostly how to differentiate between poisonous and beneficial plants, that kind of thing...”

“Then go forth and test thy knowledge in the woods. And as should go without saying, take great care in seeing that no harm comes to little Laios. ’Tis an equally important undertaking.”

“Yes, Professor!” Saybil replied enthusiastically. Los nodded her satisfaction.

“That sounds so nice! Going on an adventure with a little kid in the forest! It’s so sweet!”

“Hold up, how is this fair? How come Saybil’s the only one getting off easy?”

“It’s totally fair, and he’s not getting off easy! Sayb’s got an important job that only he can do—supplying mana!”

“Isn’t he just letting everything ride on his ability, though...?”

“Come on! You and I are just as overflowing with ability! Don’t start getting jealous of Sayb for his!” Kudo was still on all fours, and an irate Hort plopped herself forcefully down on his back.

“Gah!” Kudo groaned. “Get off me, chubbo! How ’bout you lose a few?” Each word was like a shovelful of dirt dug from his own grave.

“Well, ’twould seem you have all reached your own conclusions... But tomorrow, I advise you three to visit Mud-Black’s shop together.”

“Huh? But...what about work?” Hort asked with a concerned look, a tormented Kudo still straining beneath her.

Los laughed off Hort’s anxiety. “Not to worry, I shall run along presently and deliver word of these developments! But I’ll have thee know that entrusting work to fledglings still barely able to fly is itself the more taxing endeavor. ’Twould serve thee to abandon with all possible haste such grand delusions of how lost the world would be without thee!”

“Ughh... But I don’t wanna let them go... I wanna hold onto those delusions, no matter what...”

“’Tis a dangerous business, tying thy worth to how much others need thee, young Hort,” Los replied. “In any event, thou must learn spell control from Mud-Black, and Sayb and Kudo will surely benefit from the veritable treasure trove of books she keeps in her study. A somewhat scatterbrained young lass she may be, but that one is a greater genius even than I. You would do well to

glean all you can from her.”

2

Next morning, breakfast was for once a three-person affair—except, of course, that Los came bearing bread as she always did, which rounded out the group at four.

“Run along, now!”

As the ancient witch ushered them out of the house, Hort smiled. “You know, she really is like a mom.”

“Is that what they’re like?” Kudo asked.

“I don’t remember mine, but if she was anything like Los, must’ve been fun,” Saybil added.

A little ways down the road they looked back and saw the witch still watching them from the front door. Once she noticed their gaze, she bent her tiny body to waving her enormous staff back and forth.

“Was your mom like that, Hort?” asked Saybil.

“My mom? Hmm... Maybe before my antlers started growing in? Actually, maybe not... I’m not sure... And, I haven’t got a clue what she’s up to now. I feel like I’d rather just have Professor Los be my mom anyway.”

“That’ll never fly, birdbrain.”

“No? I was afraid of that!” Hort looked up at the sky, dejected.

“I don’t know, calling Professor Los ‘mom’ feels a little weird to me,

somehow..." Saybil murmured.

"I mean, yeah, when she looks like that."

"That's part of it, but the word just doesn't exactly fit. There's gotta be a better way to put it—"

"Whaaat? She's, like, the *perfect* mom!" Hort insisted.

Kudo sighed heavily. "Look, Hort. I'm warning you now, that witch is only lookin' out for us on a whim. Soon as she gets tired of it, she's outta here. Said so herself, didn't she?"

"Then we've just gotta make sure she doesn't get bored!"

"*'Tis a dangerous business, tying thy worth to how much others need thee,*" Kudo reminded her, mimicking Los's words exactly.

Hort's eyes widened a hair. "That's not...what she meant..."

"It's exactly what she meant. No matter how much we put into it, sooner or later she's gonna get bored. So don't get too close. She's not our mom—or anything else."

"I knooooow..." Hort moaned. "But, like, I love her way more than my real parents..."

+ + +

"Now that I really look, you've got a *ton* of books here..." Saybil marveled.

Zero had graciously welcomed the three unexpected visitors who appeared on her doorstep. Her shop had three levels: the second floor reserved for her

living space, the first for her shop, and a basement used for storage. This last was where Zero kept her library. Saybil murmured in awe as he held his candle up to illuminate a wall packed with strange and mysterious books.

“Believe it or not, I only keep a very carefully curated selection to hand. Most go to the Forbidden Library.”

“The Forbidden Library?” Saybil repeated.

“Niedora Fort. It’s in the North,” Kudo explained in the witch’s stead.

“Ahh... I think I might’ve seen something about that in a book...”

“Oh hoh...? I am impressed you have so much as heard its name. After all, the northern realm where the Forbidden Library stands is now overrun with the Remnants of Disaster. Its name was never supposed to be mentioned in your lessons, to prevent young mages from foolishly attempting the journey there.”

“Wow.” Hort looked up at Kudo. “Oh yeah, you’re from the North, aren’t you? Have you been to the library?”

“Obviously not, dumbo. You’re not gonna find the Forbidden Library on any map. It’s where they keep all the books banned by the Church.”

“So *that’s* why it’s called the Forbidden Library! Now I get it!”

“It’s not on the maps, but the merchants up north *always* go there to try an’ unload any rare books they get their hands on. They say if you find a title not already in the library, you can get enough coin to open up your own shop.”

“Whaaat?! No way!”

“To be honest, I thought it’d gotten destroyed in the Disasters, but...”

Zero furrowed her brow. “Drat, I should not have let that slip. Well... If the day comes when you outgrow this collection, I expect you will seek to travel there

yourselves.”

“Awww! I wanna know more about it *now*, Professor Zero! What’s it like?!”

“That’s...a difficult question to answer.” Zero’s eyes softened as if she were revisiting distant memories. “It lies behind a gate of human bones, where rages the eternal fire, and an endless drift of ash flutters down like snow. And the Tower of Wisdom, kept by a demon with the World-Seeing Eye—”

“So you’ve been there, Professor Zero?! To the Forbidden Library?” Hort’s own eyes sparkled.

“Indeed I have. With Mercenary.”

“Amaaazing! I *have* to go one day! I know, let’s all three of us go together!” Hort pressed the others in her excitement.

“Yeah, I’d like to go, too,” Saybil nodded.

“*Hell* no... We’re talkin’ about the North, right? You two ever seen that shit? It’s crawling with monsters.”

“No, I’ve never seen any of it, but...you have?” Saybil asked.

“I don’t even wanna think about it!” Kudo spat.

Saybil found himself turning to Zero. “Are there any illustrated reference books?”

“Depicting the Remnants of Disaster? Such tomes do exist...though I do not have any here. The Academy of Magic may, but...very few and far between are those who can surmount the incredible danger and successfully record aught of those fell creatures. The shadowy monstrosities running rampant in the North do not subscribe to the natural laws of this world. They would die to kill, and are less like living beings than demonic mischief incarnate—we call them the

Remnants of Disaster, but they are a disaster unto themselves.”

Saybil looked at Hort. “I think maybe I don’t want to go after all.”

“Nooooo!” Hort shrieked. “I-I-It’ll be fine! I’ll protect you two! C’mon, as long as Kudo can heal us if we get hurt, and you’re there to replenish our magic, we’re invincible!”

“You mean the mage who almost killed her companion and the magical doctor who passed out mid-heal? Oh, yeah. We’re invincible, all right.”

“In any event, you must first read all the books here before you can think of going to the Forbidden Library. I am happy to lend them out, so long as you keep them within the village. Feel free to take a few, whatever catches your fancy. Dawn has already exhausted this collection and has now taken to waltzing off with drafts of new spells I am working on.”

Hort looked on enviously as Saybil and Kudo wasted no time in studying the wall of books. “You’re so lucky. I wish I could pick some out, too...”

“I understand how you feel, antlered one. But continue rising to greater heights without first learning to control your power, and next time someone will assuredly die. To compensate, I shall tell you more of the Forbidden Library. Would that not be a fair compromise?”

“More than fair! Let’s go, let’s go! C’mon, hurry! Oh my Goddess, I love you, Professor Zero!” Hort slipped her arm through Zero’s and half-dragged her out of the basement room.

Kudo watched them leave with narrowed eyes that seemed to say, *Now we can finally have some peace and quiet.*

“Gotta hand it to her.”

“Huh?”

“She’ll wag her tail at anyone and smile for days. Must be exhausting.”

“Yeah, she’s amazing. I wish I could smile like that,” Saybil said as he scanned the books on the shelf.

Scowling, Kudo turned to face him. “Don’t take everything so damn literally. I was being sarcastic.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t realize. About which part?”

“Like... She goes around charming important people to get them to like her, and...”

“And...?”

“Do I really have to spell it out?”

“I mean, sarcasm is when you purposely say good things about something that’s bad, right? What’s so bad about that?”

Kudo opened his mouth to explain, then gave up. “Figure it out for yourself.”

“Ughh... Fine, I’ll just ask Hort later.”

“Don’t you dare, asshole! She’d kill me!”

“If you don’t want other people to hear something that badly, you probably shouldn’t say it in the first place... Okay, wait. Let me try saying that sarcastically.” He squared off in front of Kudo with an overly serious look on his face. “That’s real brave of you, Kudo, getting sarcastic about Hort when she’s more powerful and has better grades than you.”

“You son of a bitch! You’re dead!”

“You must be a real speed-reader if you’ve got time to prioritize killing me over picking out your books, Kudo. Wait, have you already read most of these?”

“Gaaah, *this* is the skill you finally choose to hone?! You think that little trick’s good for anythin’ but pissin’ people off?! I’m never sayin’ anything sarcastic around you again!”

“Oh, Kudo, check this one out. It’s got anatomical drawings.”

“Seriously? Lemme see.”

And so, the two spent the rest of the morning in the basement library. Saybil chose a book with maps of the nearby forests and another on herbalism, while Kudo took five tomes on illnesses and the human body.

When they went up into the yard to look for Hort and Zero, however, they gasped at the scene that greeted them. There the two women were, facing off with quite a bit of distance between them. In her hand, Zero held a straw doll.

Eyes fixed on the doll, Hort rattled off an incantation.

“That’s Flagis, right?” whispered Saybil. Kudo nodded.

Flagis was a spell that immolated specified targets. It was convenient, being as it could incinerate quarries in the forest with zero risk of the conflagration spreading, but the spell required extensive training before casters could pinpoint their aim. It was generally said to be the most dangerous of all spells taught at the Academy.

Since Flagis summoned serpents of fire, most mages offered charred snakes as a sacrifice to power the spell. Hort had crushed her own offering in one hand and scattered its ashes around her. As she began to chant, flames shot into the air, then took the shape of a serpent that slithered its way up Hort’s body. The girl pointed at Zero—that is, at the small straw effigy in Zero’s hand.

“Wait, that’s batshit! She’ll never hit something so tiny...!”

“Shh! It’s okay. Professor Zero can void spells.” Saybil curbed Kudo’s panic

with a sharp word, then stared intently as the snake sprung from Hort's arms and raced through the air. Its flames devoured the doll—then leapt to Zero's sleeve.

Ahh, it didn't work.

No sooner had the thought crossed Saybil's mind than—

"Dispel!" At Hort's cry, the searing serpent split from mouth to tail and vanished.

Zero inspected her slightly singed sleeve. "Hmm. Good."

Hort collapsed on the spot, and Saybil and Kudo ran to her side.

"Dude, you okay...?!"

"You're sweating like crazy, Hort."

"Ack! Y-You saw that...?! Ughhh! Don't watch me when I'm messing uuup!"

"Messing up?" Saybil repeated. "Was that not right?"

"I totally fudged it! I mean, I singed Professor Zero's tunic!"

"But you stopped the spell in the middle. It's hard enough just *casting* Flagis, but you managed to get it under control, too."

"The young man is correct, antlered one. Your task was indeed to burn the doll alone, but the fact that you succeeded in dispersing your attack the moment you sensed it had gone awry is commendable. Continue honing your skills in that vein. For practice, I suggest you use Flagis to light all the candles in your home."

"That's insane! She'll never have enough mana for that!"

"Your dormitory has its own mana merchant, does it not? And there are

catalysts one can use to reduce the magical power consumed. But above all else—”

Zero snapped her fingers. Instantly, innumerable tiny snakes of flame sprung from the grass around her and incinerated all the weeds sprouting in the lawn.

“That took only one casting’s worth of mana. The instructions in your textbook are but one example of how to use each spell. Their form can be altered depending on the needs of the—” Mid-sentence, Zero began to teeter. “—caster.”

She toppled over even as the last word left her mouth.

“...Huh? Wha? P-Professor Zero?!” Hort picked herself back up, and the three students ran to Zero’s side.

Grimacing, Zero waved them away. “Hmm... I miscalculated... To think, I had not enough left in me to cast Flagis even once...”

“So you’re low on mana? Is that it? Get in there, Sayb!”

“Oh, right. Professor Zero, give me your hand—”

“I’m fine. Really.” Zero waved him away once more. “No more than a dizzy spell. I used too much magic power too quickly. A little rest and I’ll recover. Mana accumulates so long as one does not expend it.”

“But you look like you’re in pain.”

“Ahh... You are kind, young man. But you have a tendency to give a little too much.”

“Give...too much?”

“Listen, young man. Everything has its limits. That includes your mana, your time, and your kindness. Constantly give of yourself without restraint and there

may come a moment when you cannot provide for those who look to you in their hour of need. Right now, I have no urgent reason to replenish my mana. I would prefer you preserve your magic and your generosity for someone else.”

Saybil met Hort’s eyes, then Kudo’s. After exchanging nods, Saybil grabbed Zero’s left hand.

“What are you...!”

“–Huh?” *I can’t give her any mana.*

Zero quickly snatched her hand back from Saybil, who stood frozen in place by this unexpected turn of events.

“Um, Professor Zero, I could give you some orally, like yesterday–”

“Huh?!” Hort blurted out. “S-Sayb, did you kiss Professor Zero, too? Like Professor Los?”

“I wouldn’t call it a kiss, I was just...refilling her mana...”

“It’s all right, young man. The situation does not call for such drastic measures. Come, is it not time for lunch? I have a perfectly-timed rumbling in my belly. A meal will also help me regain my mana.”

Zero tried to get up, only to collapse again. Though her expression did not convey alarm, her face was pale and her lips trembled. Saybil put his arms around the witch and picked her up.

“Whoa! That’s amazing, Sayb! You’re so strong!”

“I guess I’m tall, if nothing else... Sorry, but could you two go get Mercenary? I’m pretty sure she’s in no condition to go eat at the tavern right now... Plus, I should be able to boost her recovery at least a little bit if I stay with her.”

“Wh-What nonsense! Nothing can keep me from partaking in a meal! And I

have vowed that, come what may, I shall always break bread with Mercenary!”

“I understand. I just think it’s better to have Mercenary come to you this time.”

“That’s a great idea, Sayb! You’re sooo smart!” Hort cried, waving her arms around and bouncing up and down.

Kudo reached out and grabbed her shoulder. “Stop jumping. You’re gonna cause one.”

“Huh? One what?”

“...An earthquake,” Kudo wisecracked, earning him a powerful blow from Hort. “Seriously though, this could all be resolved if she just took some of Saybil’s mana. Why’s she turning it down?”

“Didn’t she just explain that?! It’s for Sayb’s sake!”

“You call that an explanation?”

“Of course! I get what she’s saying. I mean, we’re always taking magic from Sayb, but, like, what if he runs out?”

“Well, fair enough. If he had to close up the mana merchant’s, he’d really have nothing goin’ for him...”

“Arrgh! Why do you always have to cut everyone down?!”

“What? It’s the truth. Anyway, we just need to go get old man Mercenary, right? Let’s go, Hort.”

Kudo softly swished his tail by way of a parting gesture and Hort vigorously waved goodbye as the two walked off toward the tavern.

Saybil carried Zero up to the second-floor bedroom, and when he laid her out on the bed she let out a small sigh of relief. Descending to the ground floor, he made some hot tea in the kitchen (the only area of the house kept oddly tidy), then went back up to the bedroom carrying the two books he'd borrowed from the basement library. He handed a steaming cup of tea to Zero, who thoughtfully savored each sip.

"And after all I just said about curbing your generosity."

"I'm sorry... But I just wouldn't feel right not doing anything... It's for my own sake, really. Plus, I can read my book while we wait for Mercenary."

"I see." Zero closed her eyes.

Saybil gently took her hand in his once more. *I can feel the flow of mana. But I can't get any further.*

"It still won't work... How come...?"

"Drive this knife into your heart. You'll be fine, I swear it—even with this assurance, would anyone actually obey such a command?"

"...Huh?"

"I fear I might plunder *all* your mana, young man. I may be the only person in this world who could do so."

Saybil looked deep into Zero's eyes. They were a curious bluish-purple—just like his own.

"...Professor Zero, you're..." Saybil searched for his next words. Finding nothing better than the direct question, he continued. "...not my...mother...are

you...?”

“What makes you think that? The color of my eyes?”

“Well, uh... Yes.”

“Not the strongest basis for such an assumption.”

“But you said yourself that you’re the only person who could take all my magical power.”

“Interesting. That could perhaps serve as supporting evidence. And yet it is not so. You and I do certainly share deep ties, but I am not your mother.”

“Oh... I see...” Saybil’s shoulders slumped. He’d thought it would be kind of nice if she were. He couldn’t help it; she was the only person he had any memory of. But even after this hope was dashed, he still couldn’t help but feel a connection with Zero somewhere in his heart.

“So, um... Do you *know* my mother, then?”

“No, not your mother,” Zero replied. “Your father, on the other hand...”

“My father...?” repeated Saybil, taken completely by surprise.

Oh, right. If I have a mother, I guess it makes sense I’d have a father, too.

“Do you think I’ll...remember what he was like one day...?”

“No, young man. You will not. That memory alone will never come to you. I do not believe you ever met your father. Nor do I believe he ever looked upon your face.”

“Ahh... That makes sense.”

“Hm?”

“I don’t have any memories of him... Though, I mean, I can’t remember

anything to begin with, but I don't even really get what a father is..."

Imagination can't get very far with an unfamiliar idea. It was as if the vessel called Saybil did not come equipped with the capacity to consider the existence of his own father. When someone mentioned a "dad," it registered as nothing more than a vocabulary word he'd heard before.

Zero's eyes happened to fall then on one of the books Saybil had borrowed from her library. A study of herbology, it described the properties of various wild plants and explained how to mix them for pharmaceutical use. The many medicines in Zero's shop seemed to have been concocted according to this text—*gather such and such medicinal herbs, prepare them in a certain order, and infuse them with a little bit of magic*. This supposedly produced medicines significantly more potent than did the traditional formulae of herb lore.

"I was surprised you thought to borrow that book."

"Oh... It was the easiest to understand. The illustrations are really detailed, and the instructions are easy to follow..."

"That's as may be, but the handwriting is horrendous—abominably so. It took me great effort to decipher it."

"Huh... Well, mine's not much better."

A faintly sorrowful expression clouded Zero's face.

"Still, it's a little funny. None of your books have the title or author written on them, so you have to actually open them to know what they're about... All the books at the Academy's library were labeled, so they were easy to navigate."

"So it is with all the volumes the Church has bound of late, as I understand it. But most of my collection was authored by witches, who tend to have a misanthropic streak. Many care only that they themselves should understand

the contents of their books.”

“Then, why do they write them in the first place?”

“To chronicle their work. They pen these records for themselves to reread. That book you hold was written in much the same fashion. Moreover, many witches embed some manner of artifice in their texts to ensure that anyone else who reads them will fail at replicating their results.”

“What...? And this one’s like that, too?”

Zero nodded. “Presumably... At least, I would expect so, but I was never able to ferret out its secret. Still, the medicines I have brewed according to that book’s directions work wonders. They are most satisfactory—though for all their efficacy, the author of that book would still account them failures. Such are the sort of formulations you’ll find inside.”



“That’s amazing... I wonder what kind of witch wrote it.”

“It was a sorcerer.”

“Huh?”

“That book was penned by a sorcerer—in other words, by a man.”

“Oh!” *Given what we were talking about, that must mean—* “My father...? Was my father a sorcerer?”

“One of unparalleled talent. Ever calm and collected, he was logical and intensely inquisitive, eschewed conceit, and commanded unwavering strength.”

“Woorf,” Saybil groaned. “He sounds nothing like me.”

“Haha...! Yes, you might be right about that. Though we would be in terrible trouble if you *did* take after him. Even so, you called that book ‘easy to understand.’ Perhaps you will be able to find the device hidden within it that has so long eluded me.”

“That’d sure be great... But I think I’m going to have a hard enough time just interpreting what it says.”

If you don’t know the lingo, most books will be too hard to read, no matter how clearly they’re written. For starters, I guess I should just take this with me and wander around the woods a bit...

Even as the thought occurred to him, he heard the stairs creak. Saybil’s eyes met Zero’s.

“Mercenary? That was quick.”

“I imagine he sprinted here as fast as he could once he heard I had collapsed. Yet still he took the time to catch his breath, so he could climb the stairs at a measured pace... Such is his nature.”

“Huhh, he sounds kind of like Kudo...”

“I can hear every damn word you’re saying, ya know!”

No door or hallway partitioned the room from the stairs that connected the first and second floors, and the sudden, angry roar jolted Saybil to his feet.

“Gah!” he cried unwittingly, terrified by the glower in Mercenary’s eyes as the top half of his head emerged from the stairwell. “You’re really scary.”

“You could at least try to look like you mean it... Otherwise it seems like you’re making fun of me.”

“I’m sorry. My facial muscles don’t work so well...”

Mercenary trudged the rest of the way up the stairs and carried the basket he had under his arm over to Zero, who had risen to a sitting position in the bed. He laid it in the witch’s lap, and she immediately set about surveying its contents.

“My!” she exclaimed. “If it isn’t smoked pork! And sausages!”

Saybil made to offer Mercenary his chair, but the beastfallen wordlessly pushed him back down and took a seat on the edge of Zero’s bed.

“So? I hear you collapsed?”

“Nothing worthy of such ado. Merely a little dizzy spell.”

“Tell me you didn’t overestimate yourself again and burn through mana you had no business wastin’.”

“I used it to give a demonstration to the antlered one. It was a necessary expenditure.”

“And in the process you caused her, Doctor Lizard, and our young mana merchant here a whole world o’ worry.”

Never taking her eyes off the contents of the basket as she tried to decide what to eat first, Zero excitedly replied, “Don’t be cruel, Mercenary. Would you have me collapse again from heartache?”

Evidently having decided to start with some bread, Zero opened her mouth wide and took a big bite of a freshly-baked roll, still warm from the oven.

Mercenary watched her, then shrugged. “Thanks for staying with her, mana merchant,” he said, giving Saybil a quick pat on the head. Saybil flinched reflexively under the enormous paw—it could have easily smashed his head to a pulp, but one tiny twitch and Mercenary quickly pulled away.

“I’m sorry... I wanted to give her some mana, but it didn’t work...”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s not like she’s on death’s door for lack of magic, right?”

“Indeed. It’s merely the common depletion of mana all mages experience. I shall recover with rest.”

“But I’m a mana merchant, and I—”

“Oh, right, about that. It’s high time you started charging for your services,” Mercenary said.

“Huh?”

“That kid—I mean, the headmaster of the Academy of Magic sent some customers your way, right? How much they been payin’ you for your trouble?”

“Umm... It’s not so much money as rare books and mysterious implements and whatnot...”

Mercenary snapped his fingers. “There it is. See, if you sold those off, you’d already have enough to buy your own house by now.”

“Wha...?!”

“No doubt about it. I even double-checked with the headmaster. That’s how much severely depleted witches are willing to pay for the services of the one and only mana supplier in the entire world. But I hear you’ve been dolin’ it out like candy to the handymage and Doctor Magic *every morning*.”

“Um...” Saybil fumbled for words. “But...if I charge them that much, they won’t be able to come to me anymore.”

“Maybe not.”

“Then what would be the point of having my shop...?”

“That’s exactly why I’m tellin’ you to name your price. Who takes more mana: those two mages, or the dried-up witches who come all the way to this village to see you?”

“I...” Saybil considered. “I’ve never really...thought about it...”

“Then think,” Mercenary insisted. “Look, mana merchant. Sooner or later, you’ll finish this field training program and leave the village. You’ll graduate and be free to go anywhere, right?”

“I...I guess so...?” *I don’t know why, but I’ve kind of had the feeling I was going to stay here forever. Now that he mentions it, though, of course not.*

“The witch told you to open a business, but she didn’t say to serve the village for free. In other words, she was tellin’ you to do something people would pay for, and—”

“Enough, Mercenary.”

“Ow!” The beastfallen rubbed his head where Zero had hit it with a well-aimed hard-boiled egg. “What’s with you, witch? I’m talkin’ here.” With a grumpy frown, Mercenary began peeling the egg, which he had caught on its way to the floor.

“You weren’t ‘talking,’ you were ‘threatening.’ You glared, you ranted, and you left no room for rebuttal—it’s a bad habit of yours, Mercenary. You should reserve such tactics for those stronger than yourself.”

“Well... I mean, c’mon...” Mercenary pointed at Saybil and started to say something, then stopped. “No, you’re right... I was outta line.”

“N-No, you don’t have to apologize for anything...! You’re exactly right. But I don’t have any idea how to set a price for what I do...”

“I see... Well, in that case...” His eyes still on Saybil, Mercenary handed the perfectly-shelled egg to Zero.

“Allow me, Mercenary,” she said, taking his place as interlocutor. “Young man, is a mana merchant what you wish to be? Or do you wish to become a mage?”

“Huh...?”

“You have great stores of magical power—but that alone does not make one a mage. Granted, yours is a singular gift...but one does not have to be a mage to be a mana merchant.”

“That’s true...”

“Furthermore, you say you cannot name a price for your services. But if you do not, then you are simply existing. True, your existence itself is more than valuable, but I cannot credit that as the sort of work expected of a student at the Academy of Magic.”

When you put it that way...

Hort and Kudo were both fiercely working to improve. Saybil, on the other hand, was standing still. Hort had sharpened her magic so much that she was virtually unrecognizable as the apprentice who had first arrived at the village.

Kudo strove every day to save lives, and at the very least could honestly say he'd figured out what he needed to study.

But what about Saybil?

The mage's eyes fell to the book in his hand. He nibbled his lip. Here he was, planning to take this herbology text with him for a walk in the forest and actually get to know the village—finally setting out on a journey Hort and Kudo had long since taken, and that only at Los's insistence.

"Just being helpful...isn't good enough, is it...?"

"I would not say that, young man. But right now, we are discussing what you want to do with your life. If you prefer to quit the Academy and make your living as a mana merchant, then you can continue as you have thus far. If you wish to become a mage, however, then you must study and push onwards."

"I..." never actually wanted to become a mage. I just never considered there'd be other options, so I continued on, automatically. But what if I quit the Academy to live as a mana merchant—though it would mean forgetting magic, forgetting Hort, Kudo, and Los? What if that was an easier path? What if that was what people actually wanted from me?

"I... Well..."

"Sayber! We're supposed to go play in the forest, 'member?! I've been waiting forever!"

Saybil looked up, and, getting to his feet, raced over to the window. Below stood an angry Laios, shaking his tiny fist. Saybil turned back to the others in the room. "Shoot, I promised him...! I'm sorry, but I—!"

Zero nodded. "Run along. Do not feel rushed to decide. It may serve you to discuss it with the antlered one and the lizard as well. But first, here." She

handed Saybil a roll with pork and vegetables sandwiched inside. “Take this with you. You missed lunch on my account, didn’t you?”

“Th-Thank you. I, um... I’m going to really think about this.” Chomping down on the sandwich and tucking his borrowed books under his arm, Saybil practically flew down the stairs and out of the shop.

Mercenary shot Zero a sideways glance. “Never thought I’d see *you* share food with someone.”

“Aye, and now I have not quite enough for myself. Make something hot for me, Mercenary, with whatever we have in the house.”

“You’re so late, Sayber! Super, super late! You forgot, didn’t you!” Laios pounded Saybil with his tightly clenched fists. “Grown-ups are all the same! They always say they’re super busy all of a sudden, or they can’t play anymore!”

Saybil munched on his loaded sandwich. “I didn’t forget, exactly...” he said, defending himself even though he pretty much *had* forgotten. To compensate, he placed the remaining half of his lunch in the little boy’s hands.

“Oh, you were making us snacks? Well, I guess that’s all right, then!” Laios said, beaming.

The two started for the forest.

“So, where do we go?”

“Hmm. I guess...to find those leaves from yesterday. But we’ll take the proper route this time.”

Zero had presumably already furnished Los with what she needed, but Saybil couldn’t think of any other appropriate goal, and he figured Los would probably

appreciate some extra. In fact, he'd learned to enjoy blending his own teas after she once told him, "Thy blends are delicious, and truly original!"

Saybil opened the book as he walked.

"What's that book? What's it say?"

"It's all about medicinal herbs. Professor Zero stuck some notes in there, too, so I think we should be able to find the leaves if we follow those. Plus, I brought a map today."

"Wowww! You're like a real grown-up!" Laios cried excitedly. Evidently, things like books and maps were enough to prove one's maturity to a child. After much pleading on Laios's part, Saybil designated him the official map-holder.

He can just show it to me when I need to look at it.

"Umm. We're here now, right? By the witch lady's shop."

"That's right."

"So, where do we go?" Laios asked, repeating his question from a moment before. Having gone just a little ways into the forest, Saybil cross-referenced the book and the map.

"Hmm... I think the red flowers we need to look for are around here. They bloom near the water, it says."

"Okay, so the lake?"

"Right. Now that you mention it, though, there's a pond by Professor Zero's shop, too... That must be why the flowers grow there."

"I think the lake's that way!"

"Yep," said Saybil. "Laios, give me your hand." He offered his own, and Laios cheerfully took it. The child's high body temperature caught Saybil a little off-

guard.

It's such a weird feeling. Just a few minutes before, Zero and Mercenary were scolding him as a student of the Academy of Magic—as a child, where they were the adults. But now, from Laios's perspective, Saybil was the adult. *I've got to protect him. I'll have plenty of time to worry about my future afterwards.*

"Oh, hang on, Laios. These mushrooms are edible."

"Really? Think Mama would be happy if I got some for her?"

"This tree's supposed to give fruit, but..."

"Huhh? But there's nothing there!"

"Stop, Laios. That plant's poisonous. Professor Zero's note says you shouldn't touch it."

A single piece of paper compiling the edible and hazardous plants to be found in the forest was slipped inside the front cover of the book. Clearly Zero had long been preparing her library so that Saybil and his friends could borrow from it whenever they liked. And yet all this time Saybil had neglected his studies, relying completely on his unique knack for sharing mana instead.

Watching Hort's success with Flagis, a clear thought had crossed Saybil's mind: *When did she get so far ahead of me?*

There had always been a divide between them, from the very start. But Saybil had never even attempted to close that gap, while Hort had been sprinting full speed ahead all the while. At first, Saybil had been fine with that. He wasn't the star of some heroic tale. Supporting those around him suited his personality better.

Still, when faced with that stark difference in skill, Saybil had felt a strange stirring in his heart. He grew afraid that if he stayed stuck in place for too long,

Hort's dazzling figure would pull further and further away, until one day he'd lose sight of it completely.

If Saybil chose to abandon the path of the mage for life as a mana merchant, he would surrender all his memories from the Academy of Magic as well. He'd completely forget about Hort, Kudo, and even Los—and he'd never even know what he had lost.

"...I don't want that..." Saybil murmured. He closed the book with a sigh.

"So? Did you figure it out?"

"Hard to say... Why don't we just head to the lake for now?"

"How much farther is it? We've already walked kind of a lot."

"Sure have. It looks so close on the map, though."

"Hey, what about that red thing over there? We're lookin' for a red flower by a tree, right?"

Tugged along by the boy, Saybil walked a few steps, then stopped short.

"Sayber?"

"That's not it, Laios."

"Huh?"

"That's an animal... A dead one."

"What?!" The boy leapt back and clung to Saybil's leg. "Why? Why's there a dead animal there?"

"Maybe it got attacked by another animal? I hear wolves roam these woods..."

"But it's still daytime! Wolves only come out at night."

“Yeah... Anyway, let’s go another way,” Saybil suggested.

“Kay.” Laios nodded, then shuffled forward, still holding onto Saybil’s leg.
“But, we’d be okay even if there was a wolf, right?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you’re a mage, right, Sayber? Hort and Kudo can cast amazing spells, an’ you could mop the floor with a wolf, too, right?”

“Well... Actually, I...” *can’t use magic*, Saybil started to say, just like always, but this time he found that the words wouldn’t come. The admiration shining in Laios’s eyes wouldn’t permit it. So he said nothing, and ruffled the boy’s hair in lieu of answering the question.

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“We found it! The lake! And the red flowers! This is it, Sayber! Gotta be!” Laios cried, dashing towards the water. They didn’t have to search for the red flowers growing at the foot of a tree—a carpet of crimson blossoms stretched out before them in its full glory.

“They smell sooo good!” Diving into the field of flowers, Laios wiggled and waved his limbs about. Saybil crouched down next to him and began picking the younger leaves.

“This is amazing, huh, Sayber. We got so lost yesterday, but with just a book and a map, it was a piece of cake!”

“That’s because they were both so easy to understand. I bet you’ll be able to read them, too, once you get a little bigger.”

“Really? Then you and me can explore way further! There’s so much I wanna see, like caves, and cliffs, and waterfalls and stuff.” Eyes closed in reverie, Laios rolled around among the flowers. “Everyone’s always doin’ somethin’. They’re always like, ‘I’m busy, I’m busy.’ Nobody plays with me much. But I guess that’s not their fault. All the grown-ups are working really hard for the village. I’m just a kid, but I try hard, too. I don’t get in the way, and I play all by myself. Which is why it’s so extra fun to come to the forest with you, Sayber!”

“Yeah, I have a great time with you, too, Laios.”

“Heh heh!” Laios chuckled. “Then we’re fellow adventurers, huh? We’ll come back here tomorrow, too, right?”

Stuffing his bag full of the tea leaves, Saybil recalled for a moment the conversation he’d had with Los only the day before.

What’s more important: waiting in the shop for customers I’m not sure will even show up, or going to the woods and expanding my knowledge, even if someone has to wait?

“Hmm,” Saybil murmured.

“C’mon! You don’t wanna?”

“Oh, no, I was just thinking I’ve got to practice my spells.”

“Huh?” Laios sat up. “Then do it now! I wanna see! Show me some magic!”

The shadow of a frown crossed Saybil’s face. “Sorry, Laios. The truth is, I’m really terrible at it. I can’t do anything compared to Hort or Kudo.”

“Really...?”

“So...would you mind keeping me company? While I practice?”

Laios’s eyes sparkled. “Every day? You’ll practice your spells with me every

day? In the forest?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Yaaaaaaay! I’m gonna marry Sayber!”

“No, not exactly...”

Politely declining Laios’s declaration of love, Saybil stood up. Suddenly, he felt a presence. The mage surveyed the area, then cocked his head. The lakeshore was wide open, and should’ve provided a good view of anything that might set Saybil’s senses on edge, but he noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Still, he had a bad feeling. The image of the dead animal in the woods flashed in his mind’s eye.

I blew it.

We should’ve turned back the moment we saw that carcass.

“Laios, let’s head back. We can start magic practice tomorrow—”

Saybil whirled around, then froze. Laios sat stone still, too, plopped down amid the flowers. There, on a thin thread dangling from the treetop, hung a strange globe that seemed to be covered in icicles.

It had not been there a moment before.

Did it come down from the top of the tree?

About as large as a human child, the thing was grey and had a dull metallic glint. It ballooned in size even as Saybil and Laios looked on, vibrating as though it might burst at any moment. Whether it was an animal, a fruit, or some man-made contraption was impossible to tell. But Saybil knew one thing for certain:

it wasn't good. For a second, the globe seemed to shrink.

Uh-oh, this is trouble.

"Laios, get down—!"

The next instant, an explosive bang rang out, and Saybil felt a searing pain. Enormous thorns had scraped up his arm and leg, a tepid warmth trickling down to splash on the ground and cover his shoes. The globe fell with a thud, transforming into the shape of a vivid scarlet animal carcass like the one they'd seen in the woods.

"...Sayber," Laios called out, his face pale. One of the great thorns was sticking out of his stomach. Its tip had pierced the boy's abdomen, and thick drops of blood were dripping onto the field of red flowers. "What do I do...? I...I'm sorry," he whispered. "I messed...things up...again..."

The boy's little hand searched for the thorn in his stomach to pull it out.

"Laios! Don't!" Saybil rushed over and gripped his hand. If the thorn were removed, Laios might start hemorrhaging and die on the spot. And Saybil had no spells he could use to heal the wound after pulling it out. He didn't even know enough to imagine what might happen if he tried any healing magic with the barb still in place.

I've got to get him back to the village—it's our only hope.

Saybil picked the boy up in his arms.

Warm blood was slowly but surely soaking Laios's body. It was sticky and

carried the harsh odor of iron. And it was red—so red. *Was it this red a few seconds ago?*

Laio's once-brown cotton tunic was now so drenched in dark blood that its former color was no longer discernable. The boy's weak cries of, *It hurts, it hurts*, had ceased a little while ago.

Saybil trembled. His heart beat like an alarm bell. He felt absolutely no sense of weariness. He only wished that his legs could carry him faster, that he had more skill with healing magic, that he'd had the power to incinerate the unsettling thing the very instant he deemed it dangerous. More than anything, he felt a keen sense of his own helplessness.

The warmth seemed to be slowly seeping out of the smoldering, feverish life in his arms, the heavy weight feeling lighter by the minute.

Ahhh. His life—it's ebbing away.

It slipped through Saybil's fingers with the soft hiss of falling sand.

I'm not going to make it—

It's too late. I won't make it. It's too late.

I—

A nobody like me—

could never save this child's life.

"I'm sorry, Laio... I'm so, so sorry...!"

Saybil's perpetually immobile expression contorted into an agonized grimace. Tears spilled from his eyes until he could hardly see the path before him. He tripped over his own legs and lurched forward, turning his shoulder into the fall to cradle Laios's little body from the impact.

Pain coursed through him—Saybil's arm and leg had also been injured by the thing. But his own pain meant nothing to him. He quickly rose to his feet once more. That's when he realized.

“...Laios?”

He's not...

breathing—

“Laios, you can't give up! We're almost out of the forest! Just hang on a little longer!”

The boy's arms hung limp as Saybil shook him. He had lost too much blood. His face was deathly pale, his lips blue.

Saybil racked his brain, frantically running through all the spells he knew. He hadn't practiced—hadn't failed at—casting them enough. Not even close. And his successes numbered even fewer.

Hort was good with attack spells. Kudo excelled at healing. And so Saybil had somehow convinced himself he didn't need to practice so hard. That wasn't his role. But it was too late for regrets now, in this moment when he most needed power of his own.

How could I have been so lazy, so irresponsible, so naively optimistic—

“Somebody, help...” He couldn’t even save one child on his own without relying on someone else. And it was too late even to feel ashamed at how content he’d been to leave it that way.

“Professor Los...!” He struggled desperately to make any sound come out.

But—

“On thy feet, young Sayb! Mud-Black draws near!”

—a voice responded to his cry. Saybil looked up.

“...A bird?”

“Run! Run and you shall come upon them quicker! Laios yet lives!” The voice seemed to be coming from a gigantic bird that appeared like a dark shadow fallen over the forest, its long tailfeathers stretching far into the distance—toward the village.

“The Staff of Ludens...!”

Saybil stood up and started to run. The dark bird flew before him, leading the way through the woods. *Run, run!* the bird shrieked, urging Saybil’s numb, bleeding legs onward. Saybil realized all of a sudden that scores of mice he had not seen even a moment before were now pushing branches and roots out of his way, opening a path for him.

That’s when he heard the footsteps. Far from human, they were heavy, like an enormous animal’s—at the sound, Saybil’s body began trembling not with fear or anxiety, but an incalculable sense of relief.

“Professor Zero! Mercenary!” he cried, then collapsed on the spot. Mercenary rushed toward the apprentice like a charging beast and caught him in his arms,

even as Zero flitted down from her perch on the beastfallen's shoulder. The black bird flew off, replaced by Los herself, who swooped down from where she'd been tracing a path through the treetops.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...! I-I did it again... I put Laios in danger...!"

"You fool!" Mercenary roared. "Lift that chin! You protected that boy with everything you had! You stuck with it and got him to us!"

"Verily, young Sayb! The sphere that attacked the two of you is a Remnant of Disaster, which by all rights should exist only in the North. Not even I could have hoped to detect such danger in advance!"

Saybil sobbed convulsively as Mercenary lifted Laios from his arms. Zero felt the boy's limp body and softly clicked her tongue. "He has lost too much blood... Dawn! Give me yours!"

"A bold request! But yea, rejoice in my pardon! Take all thou wishest!" Los cheerfully declared as she slashed her wrist with a fingernail. Blood burst forth and dissipated into the air; meanwhile, Laios's complexion regained its color little by little.

"Magic...?" Saybil mumbled blankly as the life-saving treatment unfolded before his eyes. The wound in the child's abdomen closed almost as soon as Zero touched it, and the thorn piercing his stomach tumbled to the ground as if pushed out from within.

"Now for the final touch." Zero lightly tapped Laios's chest with her finger. The boy's body jerked violently and his breathing resumed, his drooping eyelids opening drowsily.

"...Huh? Did...Did I die...?"

"Laios!" Saybil cried, half-screaming the name as he wrapped his arms around

the child's little body. It felt warm, so very warm, and undeniably firm with life.

Meanwhile—

Zero and Los both collapsed on the spot.

+ + +

“Gracious. Verily did I tell thee to take my blood, Mud-Black, that I will own. But thou didst siphon far too much in one fell swoop, such that even I could not help but succumb to an anemic swoon!”

“I was desperate, Dawn. And might I remind you that you were the one who slashed open your wrist, which was a lot for even me to handle—”

“What's this? Wouldst lay the blame on me?”

“That is not what I said, but I did formulate that spell so that it requires only a small cut on the tip of one's finger, as was explicitly written on the draft you ran off with the other day—”

“Shut the hell up, both of you! Can't you see this is a clinic?! Pipe down and get some rest—now!” Kudo shouted. As one, the two witches' mouths snapped shut where they lay recumbent on their respective sickbeds, putting an abrupt end to their interminable arguing.

“Shit... Saybil's covered in wounds from head to toe and cryin' non-stop, Laios's all worked up and spoutin' gibberish, and *both* Professor Zero and Professor Los show up lookin' like a coupla comatose corpses... We only left

Professor Zero's place a couple hours ago! What the hell happened?"

"S-Sorry... They just...won't stop..." Saybil's face had returned to its usual iron mask, except for the endless stream of tears. No matter how much he wiped them away, they showed no sign of letting up.

"It's totally fine! It's okay to cry!" A frantic Hort sat by Saybil's side, trying to soothe him. "It's always best to let it all out!"

"But, I'm supposed to be a mana merchant, and I can't even help Professor Zero... Why am I...so useless...?"

"You're not useless at all, Sayb! Magic's super sensitive! It's only natural for it not to work when you're upset!"

As for the severely injured Laios, he seemed to have fully recovered, and was once again in high spirits. Seemingly convinced he'd become "the hero of a super exciting adventure," he was now roaming around telling the—very exaggerated—tale to anyone who'd listen.

The village doctor did follow after the boy, doing his best to keep the misunderstandings to a minimum, but by this point much of the community had already half-accepted that "Saybil and Laios were facing off in a death match with a monster that towered over them, and Laios sacrificed himself to protect Saybil, but Zero's magic saved his life."

They needed to do some real damage control. But first they needed to get their facts straight.

"By the by, Dawn."

"Yes, Mud-Black?"

"Given the speed with which you recognized danger was afoot, and the details you relayed to us...I think I can safely assume you were keeping an eye

on the mana merchant?”

“Technically ’twas not I, but little Ludens. Still, considering we were sharing our sight at the time, yes, I suppose thou mightest say I was watching him.”

Los appreciatively stroked the Staff of Ludens where it lay next to her on the bed. The jet-black globe embedded in it—what one might call its core; solid, yet able to shift its shape like liquid—had molded itself into the bird Saybil met in the forest, and conveyed Los’s messages to him. Was there anything this staff *couldn’t* do? Not even Los had yet descried its limits.

“Indeed. And you declared the thing that attacked to be ‘a Remnant of Disaster that should exist nowhere but in the North.’ How can you be so certain? What exactly did you see?” Zero asked.

For a while Los was silent. Then slowly, unsteadily, she pushed herself up to a sitting position. Zero followed suit. As Los jiggled the Staff of Ludens, a black, gooey substance flowed down and formed itself into a replica of the unsettling globe that had attacked Saybil and Laios in the woods.

“In the Forbidden Library, I read an illustrated tome, a record of madness to which the chief librarian—a bookworm whose curious character I need not elucidate to thee, Mud-Black—gleefully adds day by day. In it, I saw this: a ‘touch-me-not,’ as he named it.”

The Staff of Ludens’s touch-me-not replica burst, shooting countless thorns in all directions before crashing to the ground in the form of an animal carcass. The spines it had scattered then sprouted arms and legs and crawled up into the trees like insects, thrusting themselves deep into branches and creating cocoon-like spheres around their bodies. Once these had matured into their spiked forms, they lowered themselves from the branches by a thread when prey passed by, and the cycle began again.

Kudo's scales turned a dull grey, and his eyes filled with fear and disgust. "What the hell's the point of that...? Why's it look like a corpse after it bursts? An' why does it wait 'til an animal gets close before it blows up?"

"To kill," Los replied matter-of-factly. "Such is the nature of the Remnants of Disaster, young Kudo. These fell monsters were not born into being—they are demon-made playthings. And though this world be rid of their makers, they continue to proliferate and threaten all life—for that is their intended purpose."

"Hmm." Zero nodded. "Then, they disguise themselves as deceased animals to lure starving prey close enough for all the nearby seedlings to deliver the fatal blow—is that the thrust of it? If so, then presumably they do not possess much in the way of mobility. For this abomination to appear so suddenly in my woods"—here the light of emotion in Zero's face blew out like a candle flame—"suggests someone must have set it loose. I am exceedingly displeased."

"Ohmigoddess, seriously! That's horrible! I'll never forgive them! Once I find whoever did this, I'm gonna chuck them into a whole swarm of those spiky balls!" Hort raged, only to quickly regain her composure. "Actually, I take that back... They'd never get out alive. And their pincushion corpse would *definitely* haunt my dreams..."

"There was only one of these when we got attacked," said Saybil. "I don't think either of us would've made it if there'd been two."

Hort gasped. "That's it, into the spike swarm they go! I'll deal with the trauma somehow, Sayb. For your sake!"

"That's okay, Hort... I'd rather you put your energy elsewhere..."

"Anyway—" Mercenary, who had been quietly leaning against the wall up to this point, heaved himself into motion. "Nobody's goin' near that forest for the

time being. And we'll need to send word to the neighborin' villages if we don't wanna see any casualties—better send a message to the city, too, while we're at it. I'm gonna pay the priest a little visit."

Swishing his tail irritably, Mercenary threw open the clinic door—at which his expression turned even more sour. "Thought I smelled a filthy mutt. What do you want, Pooch?"

"I'm too fed up to keep reminding you that I'm a wolf, but you could at least look a little happier to see me..." Fist still raised to knock on the clinic door, Holdem's ears drooped and his shoulders sagged.



Chapter Three



“Someone’s catchin’ Remnants of Disaster and sellin’ em?!” Mercenary repeated in disbelief.

“Seems like it, Chief,” Holdem replied.

They were in the chapel’s dining room. After taking a sip of the tea Lily had so diligently prepared for them, Holdem broached the subject regarding which he had come, at which Mercenary’s every facial muscle and whisker twisted into a scowl.

“Why the hell didn’t ya tell us sooner?! You coulda used the witch’s letter!”

“Because it was still just a rumor. You know how hard it is to take even one of those things down? Hard to believe there would actually be people going around trapping and selling ’em. And even if it was true, we figured there wasn’t much point in informing you guys. It’s not like you could’ve done anything about it. But,” Holdem continued, “if you’ve seen ’em here, then that’s another story. Now it’s basically undeniable: the Church is behind this.”

Mercenary and Holdem turned in unison to look at the priest. Unperturbed, he finished his tea and stood up. “Lily, time to go.”

“Lily’s coming, too?”

“Who better to help in sniffing out a rat? In any event, your mice failed to detect this abnormality in the forest, meaning you will be of no assistance in exterminating the Remnants of Disaster. Leave the village watch to others for the time being, and apply yourself instead to gathering information in the city.”

“Ouw...”

As a general rule, Lily was always the first to notice any anomalies in the woods. This time, however, she'd only stirred her mice familiars to action *after* Los informed her that Sayb and Laios had been attacked. This meant Lily would not be able to divine who had released the Remnants of Disaster into the forest, or how far the infestation had spread.

“It's just, my...my friends, they're all so scared... Too scared to get close to that, that ball of thorns? They couldn't get close, so they couldn't see it, and... they didn't notice...”

“Relax, pipsqueak. The priest ain't blamin' ya. I'd heard the woodland critters were actin' up, but didn't think to find out why. That's on me. Who woulda thought someone'd be stupid enough to sic those freaks on this village outta spite.”

There was no other plausible possibility. When the infamous witch razed the northern half of the Great Continent, she started the chain of events that brought these shadows of evil into existence. If those foul creatures had in fact been intentionally unleashed against the witch's village, it had to be the anti-witch faction behind it. And given that it was essentially impossible for any individual to catch and transport the monsters, a faction of the Church opposed to peace with the witches must have lent its support—putting the issue squarely in the priest's purview.

No one could have successfully transported Remnants of Disaster all the way to the South undetected, and Holdem had indeed picked up on the illicit trade. Presumably, the merchants had sold a few along the way for extra coin.

Now it was necessary to gather information on the culprits, expose the person running the show, and bring them to justice. Defying the holy decree for

peace amounted not only to heresy and an attempt to rekindle the flames of war between the Church and the witches, but also threatened to incite a schism within the Church itself.

“So? What’s your move, Father?” Mercenary asked.

“First I’ll visit the church in town and dispatch a letter to the Loutra Cathedral. The bishop there, along with the bishop of Knox Cathedral, whose life Zero saved during the Disasters of the North, are about the only ones who have wholeheartedly accepted peace with the witches.”

“And Lily will talk with her friends in the city!”

The two detailed their plan of action, already preparing to depart.

“Right, then... I’ll make for the neighboring village to give them a heads-up and check on how things’re goin’ in their neck of the woods.”

“Huh?” Holdem blurted out. “You’re going now? But it’s almost nightfall.”

“And it’s probably a good idea to let them know before then. I’ll be damned if I wait ’til mornin’, only to find the whole community’s been wiped out.”

“You mean you’re going to leave this place unguarded so you can defend some other village? What if everyone here’s been wiped out when you get back?”

Mercenary’s whiskers twitched as he trained his eyes on Holdem, only now fully taking him in. “Well, you’ve sure got plenty to say ’bout our business... Speakin’ of, Pooch, why’d you show your face here, anyway?”

“Am I not allowed to come hang out without an errand?”

“Come all you like—once Albus is dead and the Kingdom of Wenias has fallen into ruin.”

“As if I wouldn’t be dead then, too,” Holdem shot back with genuine animus, his tail sagging. “Anyway, I’m just here to make sure everything’s going okay. The Academy of Magic has entrusted this village with three of our precious students, after all. We can’t just take the progress reports on faith and leave it at that, now, can we?”

“Hmph,” Mercenary snorted noncommittally. “What’s your read, Father?”

“A rather weak pretense under which to send the chief state mage’s personal manservant. Especially when the Academy of Magic has a witch with the farsight, if I’m not mistaken.”

One of the witches at the Academy did indeed possess an unusual ability known as the World-Seeing Eye. If need be, she could probably even spy on a secret meeting being held in the deepest depths of the ocean.

Despite their distrust, however, Holdem did not budge. “Madea can only observe one place at a time, and there are plenty of others we need to keep an eye on. Not to mention that you’ve got Zero here, or had you forgotten? She could put up a barrier, show us whatever she wanted... If we want to check in, no choice but to drag our asses down here in person.”

“I see. A most logical argument.”

“Hah. Ain’t you got it rough.”

The priest and Mercenary gave each other a nod.

Holdem continued. “Plus, it’s tricky to pinpoint a location from purely visual information, and the farsight doesn’t pick up sound. If it did, we wouldn’t have to bother with an investigation. We’d find the bastards behind these Remnants of Disaster like *that*.”

“Which is why they sent their least useful agent to scope out the least urgent

spot on the list?”

“I came! because I’m the one! who’s most familiar! with the circumstances! And the most capable! Obviously!” the lupine beastfallen exclaimed, emphasizing each word in a strong staccato.

Mercenary clapped him on the shoulder. “Perfect. Then we can’t exactly let such *capable* talent go to waste, can we?”

“...Huh?”

“The priest and I are headin’ out, but the Remnants of Disaster are prowlin’ these woods and we’ve still got no clue who put ’em there. Not wild about leaving the village in the hands of a worn-out witch and an anemic grandma,” Mercenary explained. “So hold down the fort for us.”

Holdem’s ears pricked up as his face twisted into a wry smile. “You sure you’re okay leavin’ such an important job to me? I’m the guy who couldn’t save the one woman who mattered to him, remember?”

Mercenary roared with laughter. “Don’t kid yourself, Pooch. You ain’t the only one whose regrets keep him awake in the middle of the night.”

The priest shrugged in agreement. “Don’t try to claim the role of tragic hero until you’ve at least killed your first love with your own hands. If your past failures leave you unwilling to confront the challenges ahead, what are you living for?”

Holdem put up his hands in defeat. “Looks like I won’t win this sob-story contest. I was never gonna turn you down. Just warning you not to come cryin’ to me if you regret it later.”

“Don’t sweat it, Pooch. I never had an ounce o’ trust in ya to begin with. Just figured we’d put you to work, now that you’re here.”

“C’mon, not even an ounce...?”

“Make up your mind! You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” Mercenary sighed and glared at Holdem out of the corner of his eye. “Anyway, that’s the story. Check up on whatever the hell you want while we’re gone. Don’t know how long yer plannin’ to stay, but go ahead and take any of the empty houses.”

“I, for one, would appreciate if you could rid the village of these malevolent monsters while you’re here.”

“Now that’s just—”

“An impossible feat, without a witch’s protection—Father, do not torment him so.”

The voice came from outside the chapel window. Everyone in the room looked up to find Zero waving with one hand, her chin resting atop the other, elbow braced on the sill.

“You—!” Mercenary raced over to the window. “What the hell d’ya think you’re doing! You should be in bed!”

“I see right through you, Mercenary. You meant to leave me here and go to the neighboring village alone, didn’t you?”

“Well... I mean, you’re runnin’ on empty...” Mercenary frowned. “Didja buy some magic from the mana merchant?”

“No. My reserves are as depleted as ever.”

“Then—”

“But I am still a witch, Mercenary, and a very handy one at that. I can protect you from danger.”

The beastfallen’s ears drooped as he took a half-step back and turned to the

other three, looking for someone to back him up.

“I think you should take Mud-Black with you, Chief. At the end of the day, beastfallen like us were made to work with witches. If she’s low on magic, just lop off an arm as an offering and she should have enough for at least one spell, right?”

“Shut your trap, Pooch. Nobody asked you.”

“I concur—you should take her with you. Or rather, if Zero has decided she will go, none of us can stop her. Such is the nature of the witch, is it not?”

“Easy for you to say...”

“Lily thinks you should stick together! No matter what!”

“C’mon, pipsqueak, not you too...”

With a defeated look, the hulking beastfallen turned back to Zero, who was positively beaming. “Then it’s unanimous. Have no fear, Mercenary. Dawn and the wolf will remain. As will the three apprentices, fledglings though they be. Personally, I believe you’ll be much safer with me than making for the next village on your own,” she added, driving the last nail into the coffin of Mercenary’s protestations.

The scowling beastfallen growled in response. Zero reached out and gently poked the deep cleft the frown created in his forehead. “Consider, Mercenary. You are not in top form, thanks to the antlered one’s spell. Shouldn’t your highest priority now be to *avoid* all threats? If you mean to survey the area, all the more reason to take me with you.”

“But you didn’t notice those mutants in the woods, either.”

“It is an entirely different matter to search for something you know exists than it is to subsist in ignorance. I go in search of the Remnants of Disaster. And

I promise you, I will find them.”

Mercenary finally let out a resigned sigh.

2

“Anyhoodles, I’ll be takin’ charge of the village’s defenses for the time being. Not that I need to introduce myself—to you, at least, right, Saybil?”

Holdem had left the clinic with Mercenary almost as soon as he’d arrived, but launched into this explanation upon his return.

“Who’s that?” Hort whispered to Kudo.

“The headmaster’s manservant,” Kudo spat.

Los, for her part, had fallen into a deep sleep even as she bemoaned her anemic condition.

Generally speaking, the headmaster did not appear before her students, and they had even fewer opportunities to get to know her right-hand wolf.

Frowning, Hort grumbled a low *hrmm*, then suddenly shot her hand into the air. “Excuse me, Mr. Manservant, sir!”

“That’s Holdem to you. Head of Defense Forces. Super capable.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Super Capable Head of Defense Forces Holdem, sir!”

“Wow, it’s a rare occasion that you meet such an obedient, forthright young lady these days. You might just steal my heart. So, what can I do for you?”

“The last test we had to do made me feel, like, really, really awful! It was super scary and brought up all these horrible memories, and I’m pretty sure it

traumatized Kudo and Sayb and Professor Los, too. Did you come here to do awful things like that to us again?!”

“Right, guess there is such a thing as *too* forthright. Even if that were my plan, did you think I’d give you an honest answer?”

“Not at all! But I thought maybe I could wangle a hint if I came at you with a surprise question!”

“Wowww. Hort, that’s so clever.”

“I’ve got all the pro tricks for scoring well on a test!”

“Well then, *pro*. Get anythin’ outta that?” Kudo asked.

“Hmm,” Hort cocked her head. “Nope!”

“Then what was the point?!”

“Only the most basic, basic beastfallen would give up there, Kudo! The secret to success is to keep trying until you get the result you want!” Hort insisted, fists clenched.

Kudo glowered at her through narrowed eyes, then turned his back as if to declare he couldn’t care less about her or even Holdem. “He can go ahead and test us or spy on us or whatever the hell he wants. Him being here doesn’t change a damn thing for me—I’ve still got a job to do.”

“You say that, but your tail looks super anxious, Kudo.”

“Shut UP, asshole!”

“Oh, sorry,” Saybil said. “But, your scales aren’t their usual color either, so...”

“Stop! Just stop talking! Don’t look at me! Shut your mouth!” the beastfallen railed as he snatched his cloak from its hook on the wall and threw it around himself, then whipped the hood down over his face.

At that, even Hort had to shoot Saybil a scolding look. “Saaayb, that was *mean*.”

“Sorry...” mumbled Saybil.

“Well, I *am* here to make an inspection,” Holdem said, taking a seat. “But that doesn’t entail anythin’ special. Just go about your business as normal, like Kudo says. As long as you don’t leave the village, of course, since we’ve got these Remnants of Disaster roamin’ the woods.”

+ + +

“I know you’re awake, Loux Krystas.” Only after the three students had left and he alone remained in the clinic did Holdem address her.

“Silence. I am in repose. Disturb not my slumber.”

“So you *are* awake.”

“I am too bereft of blood even to rise. Merely sitting up sends my head a-spinning. I have no energy to squander on third-rate lackeys.”

“So you say, but it’s just to make me let my guard down, I’ll bet. I know your ways, witch. Just lie there and listen to what I’ve got to say.”

Upon his insistence, Los labored to raise herself to a sitting position.

Holdem’s ears twitched. “Wow, you really do look awful.”

“’Tis the result of giving my blood to a little lad. But never mind that, Holdem. Thou art sorely mistaken if dost think I have not made certain inferences.”

“Hunh?”

“The Remnants of Disaster. The very instant they reared their foul heads, thou dost appear for thine inspection. Am I truly to believe these two events have no relation?”

“They honestly don’t. If I let one of those monsters loose and things went south, it might wind up wiping out the whole village. I’m not dumb enough to destroy the place just to test it.”

Los fixed her rainbow-colored eyes on Holdem—piercing eyes that discerned truth from falsehood. But Holdem showed no sign of wavering beneath their penetrating stare, and Los’s expression softened somewhat. “Very well, you have my attention! Thou mayest speak.”

“Can’t you and the Staff of Ludens get rid of the Remnants of Disaster?”

“Hah. Quite the tall order to spring on someone. Whence cometh this?”

“Is it really all that strange? This is an official request, Loux Krystas. You’re too clever not to have noticed this village’s weakness.”

“Hmm,” Los murmured, stroking her chin. “Its lack of fighting strength, I presume you mean?”

“Exactly. I’m talking less about numbers and more about battle readiness, though.”

“If we consider this village alone, then one battle-hardened Mercenary, one beastfallen mouse general, a former Arbiter, three fledgling mages, and I should more than suffice... Yet their concern extends to the neighboring villages as well, I assume. Moreover, should we be tasked not only with defense but also the search for the perpetrator behind this political crime, the insufficiency of our forces becomes exceedingly clear. We have that blasted Albus’s poor direction to thank for this, I warrant. She burdens the people of this village with

too many responsibilities.”

“Don’t mince words, do you? My lady’s been runnin’ around like crazy trying to put out the little fires that keep poppin’ up everywhere before they can spread. Like that Arbiter who attacked you on your way here—the Tyrant, was it? Reports of clashes like that are pourin’ in from all over.”

“Peace does not yet reign, I see.”

“Loux Krystas, I can’t stand you, but I do recognize your power. You’re the only witch my old master ever relied on.”

Los bit her lip and anxiously drew the Staff of Ludens close. “Wh-What’s this? So sudden... I like not the feeling. But yes, Sorena was my friend. And she entrusted to me the world she left behind.”

“Right, so for starters, I’d like to ask you to exterminate the demonic Remnants of Disaster threatening this village.”

Los pursed her lips. “...And my compensation?”

“Access to the Forbidden Library’s restricted section—in other words, permission to read the *Grimoire of Zero*.”

“What?!” Los was flabbergasted. “Is it not kept at the Academy of Magic?!”

“You shoulda realized that was a lie the minute the rumor started circulatin’. Some lowlifes really do try to come after it at the Academy—no way we’d be stupid enough to actually keep it there.”

“Hnnh! A sound argument! That blasted Albus. Such cunning from an impertinent whelp!”

“So...you understand, right? What it means that I told you this?”

“Thou hast finally capitulated and elected to trust me?” Los said with a self-

satisfied smirk.

Holdem did not deny it. “I haven’t told my lady yet, of course. I’m proposing this offer strictly in my capacity as the inspector dispatched here on her behalf, because I’ve deemed it necessary in order to protect the village.”

“And as such, there remains the possibility I may be unable to access the *Grimoire* after all?”

“I’m trusting you, Loux Krystas. So, I’m gonna need you to trust me, too—trust that I’ll convince Albus to grant you access.”

“Hmm... Aye... Quite the gamble. This third-rate manservant likes me not. He may well be attempting to pull his wolfish wool over mine eyes. If so, the detriment to me would be—”

“Nothing,” Holdem pompously declared. “You’ve got a soft spot for this village, don’t you? Otherwise you’d hit the road a long time ago. And you always go all out to protect what you love. You know the villagers’ll sing your praises if you make monster-meat of those things lurking in the woods. And you *love* praise. It’s a win-win here for you. No?”

“Argh! How vile! Thou speakest as if couldst see right through to my very core!”

“Am I wrong?”

“No, thou art entirely correct! So be it, rejoice in my pardon! I have a great love of keen perception. I accept the task! I shall greet those fools who left me behind with the smote corpses of those fell abominations!”

Los leapt to her feet atop the bed, threw out her chest, and unleashed a high-pitched cackle. Almost instantly, though, her blood pressure plummeted and she staggered sideways. Holdem shot halfway out of his chair in alarm, but the

Staff of Ludens caught the wobbling witch just in the nick of time. Holdem's outstretched arms, now left with no one to support, groped vacantly for a moment before dropping to his sides as if nothing had happened.

"All right. I'm trusting you, Loux Krystas."

"Aye. Noon or night hath no meaning for those crystalized nightmares, the handiwork of demons. My little Ludens and I are off to hunt them before they claim further victims. 'Twill be but the work of a moment," she exclaimed, then teeter-tottered out the door.

Holdem watched her leave with furrowed brows. "...Is she really gonna be okay? She won't die on me, right...? That'd haunt my dreams for sure..."

I do trust her to take care of something like this—when she's in top form. Does this witch, stumbling from loss of blood and with no magic of her own, actually have it in her to hunt down those freaks? It's not too late to stop her...

The lupine beastfallen wavered for a moment, but in the end he held his tongue.

"...Now, then." Holdem fished from his bag a small glass marble, inside which a red star seemed to be suspended in liquid—then casually crushed it in his grip. Shards of broken glass sliced into his hand and blood welled from the cuts, dripping onto the floor. But by the time he unclenched his fist, the shards of glass had vanished without a trace. Wiping his blood-stained palm with a cloth, Holdem sauntered out of the clinic.

Meanwhile.

A pair of handcuffs suddenly clicked open and dropped to the ground with a

heavy, metallic clank. The key, a glass marble imbued with magic, had been destroyed. The man who had been wearing them, seated on the edge of a wagon bed and humming as he gazed at the birds among the trees, looked down and let out a soft *Ah*.

“Didn’t have to wait nearly as long as I figured. Pays to have a boss who gets shit done, I guess.” He rolled his neck around to work out the kinks, then wrapped his hand around the familiar haft of his weapon and shouldered it as he stood. “Awright! How’s about we get down to business!”

With a whoop of laughter, the Tyrant rushed into the evening forest.

3

Wow, what an action-packed day, Hort thought to herself. In the morning I went to practice magic with Zero, but then she collapsed so I ran to get Mercenary, then I headed home and practiced some more, and then Saybil came back from the forest all wounded and stuff. As if that weren’t enough, Holdem shows up from Wenias, then Zero and Mercenary and the priest and Lily all rush off somewhere.

And there are Remnants of Disaster in the forest. Still doesn’t feel real.

“So, like, those Remnants of Disaster things? You’ve both seen them—I’m the only one who hasn’t. I mean, I heard about them in class, but...” Hort puffed out her cheeks.

For some reason, none of the apprentices had really wanted to go home after they left the clinic, and they wound up lingering listlessly around the well in the village square.

Saybil looked at Hort, his face expressionless as ever, yet somehow troubled. “It’s not exactly a fun thing to see...”

“More like you don’t normally live to tell the tale. Anyone who actually *wants* to see one’s got a few screws loose.”

“But liiiike, I feel like I’m losing out...”

The Church had taught Hort that being a sore loser was sinful. *Aim only for triumph over others, and you shall lose sight of that which is right.* But Hort wanted to be the very best. She just couldn’t help it.

“So, what? You wish it’d attacked you instead?”

“Of course I do! If it had come after me, I woulda killed it like—Oh.” She came to a screeching halt midsentence.

“Too late, dude. You basically just called Saybil useless.”

“N-No I didn’t! I didn’t say that, Sayb! Honestly, I don’t believe that one tiny bit!”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s the truth.”

“S-Sayb...!”

“I had to face facts while I was running through the forest with Laios in my arms: that it wouldn’t have gotten so bad if I could cast like you and Kudo... That I’ve been slacking off, wasting all this time. I thought I didn’t need to try since I could be helpful anyway, but...”

That’s not true! You’ve been doing your best, too, Sayb! Hort wanted to say, but she swallowed the words before they came out. Because it *was* true. Saybil *had* been lounging around every day. And he hadn’t put in nearly as much work, even compared to Kudo. Still, Hort didn’t actually believe hard work was a

virtue. In fact, she thought getting to help people without killing yourself over it was the ideal.

Hort hungered to be stronger than anyone else. She had an absolute blast practicing her magic, feeling and seeing her own progress, and she loved being on the receiving end of people's gratitude. Hort's efforts didn't feel like *hard work*. Which was why she'd never thought twice about Saybil loafing around aimlessly.

But now, she wasn't so sure.

Should Saybil have been working harder? Should he start now? Should he grit his teeth and overcome his weaknesses? Hort knew he hadn't ended up here because he was chasing the dream of becoming a mage; he just hadn't had any other options.

"Look, it's Professor Los."

Saybil suddenly noticed Los coming their way from the direction of the clinic. When the witch saw her three students ensconced in their summit by the well, she just greeted them with a quick wave of her staff before continuing on her way toward the forest.

"What's that about...?" asked Kudo. "Is she going into the woods?"

"Huuuh? Isn't that, like, off-limits, though?"

"Yeah... Maybe she's an exception...? Going to investigate or something?"

"Investigate...?" Kudo scowled. "She doesn't have the blood for that right now, dude. Look at her, she can't even walk straight."

"R-Right? Now I'm super worried!" Hort cried.

And yet, they did not reach the conclusion that *we should go after her*. They'd

abandoned all vain pretension that they might be of help. Arrogance had already led them to follow forbidden paths, inviting the worst of outcomes. Greenhorns had no business sticking their noses in where they didn't belong—especially under such dangerous circumstances.

“I feel so...restless,” whispered Hort.

Saybil nodded. “Yeah... I want to get stronger.”

“Huh?”

“I don't want to be just a mana merchant... I want to become a proper mage, like you and Kudo. That's what I decided today.”

Eyes sparkling, Hort beamed from ear to ear as she leapt to her feet. “Y-Yeah! That's it, Sayb! Let's practice our spells together! Then we can all graduate and become mages—together!”

“Little late, doncha think? Wait a second... So this whole time you didn't care about becoming a mage? What kinda shit is that?!”

“S-Sorry... But, starting today I'm *really* gonna put my head down and practice. So...um, I might not have time to do you guys' laundry and stuff anymore.”

Instantly, Hort blushed beet red. “I-I already told you! You don't have to do that! Leave my clothes alone! Geez!”

“What about your mana merchant gig, though? You gonna close up shop?”

“I mean... I don't really know yet. That's the only thing I *can* do right now... But Professor Zero told me that alone doesn't cut it as mage work.”

“Ah-hah!” Kudo exclaimed, oddly triumphant. “So the profs finally caught on, huh? Now they see this whole mana merchant thing was a lazy scam all along!”

“Whaat? But you were so into it at first!” Hort insisted.

“It’s fine, it’s my fault for not being able to put a price on what I do. At least, that’s what they said. But since I can’t cast myself, I can’t get a sense for how much mana is worth, or how much of it gets used up by different spells... Plus, I had such a hard time giving Professor Zero any. I think if I learn to actually control my mana, I’ll be able to come through when it really counts.”

“Hmm.” Hort mulled this over. “So, like...you can keep doing your mana merchant thing, but you’ve gotta get *really* great at it, and to do that you’ve absolutely gotta practice magic...?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Wait, sooo...you’re not gonna quit your job? You’ll still share mana with Kudo and me...?”

“Of course. Like I said, that’s all I *can* do right now.”

“Oohh... Thank Goddess...! That’s great, but also complicated! If I’m being really honest, I’ve been thinking I need to expend less mana and, like, figure out a healthier system so I don’t have to ask you to top me up every day...! But I’d also be in big trouble if you just up and quit...!” Hort clutched her cap with both hands and curled up into a ball.

“Oh,” Saybil said. “So, I...wanted to ask you guys something.” He looked at Hort and Kudo in turn. “I know this might slow you down, but...I’d like you two to teach me to cast spells. In exchange, I’ll refill your mana. Does that sound like a fair deal?”

Hort and Kudo exchanged a glance.

“Sure, why not? It’d feel less like mooching that way.”

“A hundred percent, Sayb! Ask me anything you want! I’m actually pretty

amazing at magic control!”

“Yeah, just like everything else you do... The hell is that? You tryin’a be modest or somethin’? You really steam me up.”

“That’s on you for letting something so tiny get to you!” Hort waved her clenched fists, fuming. But then the subject of mana refills suddenly made her recall something.

I can’t not ask. This feels like the perfect time to do it.

“B-But yeah, so like...! I’ve been wanting to ask you something, too!” Feeling unbearably hot, Hort took off her cap and hugged it tightly to her chest. She could hardly look Saybil in the eye, and wound up more or less staring at the ground.

“Whoa,” Saybil exclaimed. “Your antlers got pretty big.”

“Wha?”

“I don’t think you could hide them under your hair anymore. You growing them out?”

“Oh, um...! I haven’t had time to file them down, so they just kinda kept going...” Suddenly bashful, she fingered her antlers. “Sorry, nobody wants to see these, huh...!”

“No way, they’re really cool.”

“Huh? C-Cool?! ”

“Right, Kudo?”

“I mean, I don’t really... Antlers are antlers, ya know?”

“What...? Kudo, you don’t think antlers are cool? Weirdo.”

“You really tryin’a make *me* the weird one?! You’re *obviously* the freak here, dude!”

Still unsettled, Hort kept nervously fiddling with the antlers atop her head. *I’ve been meaning to file them down, but maybe I’ll just let them go. Yeah, that feels right.*

“Ah, sorry. I really got us off track there. You wanted to ask me something?”

“Oh, um, yeah... You know how you said, like, when you gave Professor Zero that mana...you, um, did it through the lips?”

“Ohh,” Saybil said. “Yeah. She was kind of in a hurry, I guess.”

“D-D-D-Do you think...! Th-There...There’s a chance you might, like, d-do it that way with m-m-me, too...?”

“Huh? No, I don’t think so...”

No hesitation. Hort flushed lobster red right up to the tips of her ears. “I-I see! Yeah, makes sense?! Aha, ahahaha! It’s just, you know, you did that with Professor Los, too, so I was like, maybe that’s a normal way to share mana?! Just out of curiosity!”

“It’s all right. They were both in a real hurry, so I didn’t exactly share it. They sort of stole it from me.”

“Can’t believe that doesn’t faze you, dude.”

“Faze me?”

“Just try picturing it if the roles were reversed. Like, if a crazy powerful sorcerer forced a kiss on a girl who could hand out magic power. That doesn’t creep you out?”

“Hunh?” Saybil let out a confused grunt. “I mean, I like Professor Los and

Professor Zero... And I wasn't grossed out or anything when they kissed me. I don't really think anything would change if the genders were reversed."

"You heard him, Hort. Thoughts?"

"Whaa?! Hmm, so if Professor Zero and Professor Los were men...and Sayb was a girl...would that make me a boy...? Hmm, or even if I was still a girl..."

Hort put her imagination to work. She conjured up an image of Zero as a dazzlingly beautiful man and Los as a gorgeous boy, then pictured them stealing kisses from a young lady named Saybil...

"Wah! Awawa...! Nooope! Nope, nope, nope! That's just obscene! And shameless! It's a mortal sin—the Goddess would never forgive it! I'll never let them have their way with my little Saybina!"

"Saybina...?"

"My'?"

Undeterred by the leery looks her fellow apprentices shot her, Hort pounced on Saybil and clutched his arms.

"A girl's lips are very, very precious, Saybina! You can't let just anybody kiss them, okay?!"

"Hort, you're confusing your imagination for reality..."

"Ohh, oonh... If you're gonna parade your lips around like it's no big deal...! I-if you're gonna let just anybody kiss you, Saybina...! Then, you wouldn't mind if I...!"

"Hort! Take it down a notch or three! What the hell's wrong with you?! Your pupils are huge! And your nose is bleedin'!" Panicked, Kudo wrenched Hort off Saybil and dunked the feverish girl's head in a bucket of well water.

Several seconds later.

Hort whipped her sopping head out of the bucket. “Hah! Wh-What was I...? Where’s my sweet little Saybina...?!”

“Over here, hiding from a creep... Saybil, this girl’s definitely got a thing for the ladies.”

“She *did* go on and on about how cute Professor Los was when they first met.”

“Th-That’s not—! I don’t care about that! That’s not what matters to me! I’d like Sayb whatever his gender...! Also, real talk, you *do* realize we’d all be in deep doo-doo if Professor Los was a little hunk, right?! It might trigger a world war, even!”

“Well, well, well, you three’ve certainly gotten chummy.”

They’d all noticed the footsteps approaching, but it was only after the voice addressed them that the three turned to see who it was.

“Holdem,” said Saybil.

“Mercenary told me to find a bed in one of the empty houses, but...honestly, I’ve got no clue which are unoccupied. Mind taking me to one that’d fit the bill?”

“Uh, sure, I can do that,” Hort offered. “I probably know the village best.”

Kudo spent his days either cooped up in the clinic or making house calls in neighboring villages. Hort, on the other hand, took jobs from all sorts of people at Mercenary’s tavern, and could put a name to every face in the village.

Naturally, she also knew which houses were vacant, and had a rough idea which were less than structurally sound.

And it should go without saying that Saybil stood no chance of helping here, since he'd only just ventured outside the confines of their dorm the day before.

Holdem, however, put up his hands. "Hold on, now. That's a risky plan. Me and a sweet young thing wanderin' into empty houses together? Don't wanna saddle the village with another mouth to feed."

"Ew, gross," said Hort, stone-faced. She shuffled quickly away from the lupine beastfallen and clung to Saybil's back. "Ugh, what do I dooo? I can't... Like, I literally, physically can't, Sayb... If I can't even muster a polite smile, you know that says something..."

"You could totally report that to the headmaster... Anyway, forget this asshole."

"Yeah, I agree. Maybe just take him to one of the houses that are about to collapse."

"Aaaah! Let me go back in time and try that again! I'm sorry, that was my bad! Please, just don't tell Albus...!" Holdem immediately caved and offered an earnest apology. But a reputation once destroyed is not so easily rebuilt.

"Ewwww! No way am I gonna be alone with him! Come with me, you guys!"

"No, you hang back, Saybil," said Kudo suddenly, looking up. "I'll go." The object of his gaze was a man so burly that one glance was enough to know he did some kind of physical labor. Though much older, his face was the spitting image of Laios's.

"...Uls." It was Laios's father—the father of the boy who'd ventured into the forest with Saybil earlier that day and nearly died.

If he was here, then Saybil had to speak with him.

Hort gently peeled herself off Saybil and gave him a few encouraging pats on the back. “C’mon, Kudo... And you, *Holdem*.”

“Kh! The revulsion in your eyes...! Just like when my lady was young...! Actually, I don’t mind it all that much.”

“You seriously wanna add to your creep factor...? C’mon, let’s go.”

Saybil watched the three walk off, then turned to Uls. After a moment of hesitation, the lumbering man took a few steps closer.

“Uls, I—”

“I’m sorry, Saybil.” Uls cut him off. “I know this wasn’t your fault. Laios cried his eyes out covering for you. And I heard the real story ’bout what happened in the woods... Still, I’m sorry.”

“Huh...?”

“Don’t ever come near my boy again.”

“...Oh.”

“That’s all I came to say.” Uls clenched his fist.

He’s probably dying to hit me. In the heroic tale he’d spread, Laios had gotten injured jumping in to protect Saybil. Uls must’ve gone mad with fury when he first heard that account, after which Laios had panicked and told him the true story. But that wasn’t enough to quell Uls’s wrath. The fact remained unchanged that his son had gone into the forest with Saybil and almost lost his life. That was why—

“...Yes, sir.”

—Saybil could do nothing but accept his judgement.

“I imagine Laios’ll try to come see you again. Turn him away, understand?”

“...Yes.”

Saybil had promised he’d practice magic with Laios in the forest every day. Mere hours earlier, he’d seen the boy’s face nearly explode with happiness at the prospect. In practically the same breath, however, here was Saybil promising Laios’s father he would keep his distance. He felt like he might choke, like his throat was cemented shut.

Uls turned his back to the mage, signaling that there was nothing more to say.

“E-Excuse me...! Could you please...! T-Tell Laios something for me, at least??”

“...What?”

“Tell him that once I really learn to use magic... Once I’m sure I can protect him... I’ll take him to the forest again.”

The burly man scowled. “You’re only in the village for the field training program, right? You really want to make a stopgap promise like that, when you don’t even know how long you’ll be here?”

“I’ll come back—I will. Once I’m a real mage,” Saybil declared.

Uls stopped in his tracks and turned back to face the young man.

“Plus... It might not take that many years. Hort’s grown *so much* since she came here. Kudo, too. I’ve been spinning my wheels this whole time, but...I intend to catch up to them. With their help.”

Uls glanced at Saybil’s arm and leg. The wounds had healed, but the blood-red stains on his clothes—from when Saybil had run for all he was worth with little Laios in his arms, despite his injuries—remained.

“...Why would you go so far for my son...?”

“Because he’s my friend.”

“Do you have any idea how much older you are?! In Laios’s eyes, you’re a grown-up. And from your point o’ view, a kid like Laios...”

Saybil cocked his head. “Does age make a difference between friends?”

“If you seriously think it doesn’t, that’s a whole other problem.”

“But, I don’t remember anything from before I enrolled at the Royal Academy...so I don’t know much more about the world than he does...”

The scowl on Uls’s face hardened.

“I’m sorry... I’m irritating you, aren’t I?”

“Sure are.”

“But I won’t back down. I made a promise. I told Laios we’d play adventurers again. If I accept everything you’re asking of me now and swear to you I’ll never go near him, I’ll be breaking that promise. I’m sorry. I know it’s selfish of me to say all this after I failed to protect him. But I’d like you to tell Laios I’m going to keep our promise.”

Uls was clearly beginning to thaw. His tightly clenched fist had at some point relaxed. Left without a role, his hand moved to stroke the back of its master’s neck, then fell to his side in resignation.

“...Until then...”

“Huh?”

“I’ll teach Laios more about staying safe in the forest...” the man grumbled sheepishly, then clicked his tongue and walked off. Only after Uls had gone quite a ways did Saybil realize he’d forgotten to say thank you.

Letting out a small sigh of relief, Saybil headed back to the dorm alone. On his

way upstairs, he heard a sound: a knock at the back door.

Who could it be at this hour? And why would they use the back door instead of the front?

It felt suspicious, but Saybil politely opened the door all the same.

“Huh...? There’s nobody—”

An arm shot out from the darkness and cruelly wrapped itself around Saybil’s neck. He wanted to shout, but no sound came out, and the more he struggled, the further away his consciousness slipped.

“Pretty careless of ya, little man. Should never open the door without checkin’ who it is first.”

Excellent point, Saybil earnestly agreed inside in his head, before everything faded to black.



Chapter Four



Ever since I was a li'l runt, I've always done like I was told. My pops was a blacksmith's apprentice, and once he died, the blacksmith became something like a surrogate dad to me. Don't think you coulda called either of 'em a "good father," though. Neither one knew how to scold a kid without using his fists.

My mom died giving birth to me, or so I heard. The blacksmith's other apprentices jeered at me, sayin' she'd actually run away with another man, but I never had the kinda morals that'd get me riled up over the infidelity of some woman I'd never met.

I was always good at followin' orders, so the blacksmith took a liking to me. His workshop mostly wrought hunting traps, and we'd go around the forest on the hunt for wild animals—'til he got sick and died one day. His students scattered and before I knew it, I was the only one left at the smithy.

Still, for a few years I managed to cobble together a hand-to-mouth existence, fillin' what orders did happen to come in and huntin' game to sell for coin. Then, one day, a nobleman came to me with a special request.

"Wild beasts are tearing up our fields and putting us to terrible trouble. They're unusually wily, and slip free of every traditional trap we set for them. I'd like you to make some so complex that not even a human could escape."

Any jackass could see plain as day what he really wanted: this guy was askin'

me to make man-traps.

I didn't feel any way about it. Like my master always said, *Never turn down a job*. And my old man, he told me to *always do as you're told*.

So I made them—I made whatever that nobleman asked for: spring-loaded metal fangs that clamped down on a person's leg, cages lined with spikes, cages that could never be opened from within, blades that'd hack off the arm of whoever took the bait.

One day he asked me: "Would you like to see one of your traps in action?"

"Yes I would," I replied. I figured it was only natural for an artisan to make sure his creations worked properly.

The snare had caught a child.

"We let criminals loose in the woods with the promise of a pardon if they can make it out alive. But ever since we started using your traps, not a single one has."

The nobleman smiled as he explained this, then thrust his splendid sword straight through the terrified girl's heart. She didn't even scream.

Turns out there are more nobles out there with a taste for man-huntin' than you might expect. Probably not too many who'd go outta their way to have special traps made to order, but plenty who set criminals loose on their land to stave off the crushing boredom of winter, when more...traditional prey thins

out.

I was pretty damn curious what kinda crime the little girl coulda committed... But it wouldn'ta shocked me to find out they'd bought her off some dirt-poor family, framed her as a criminal, then chased her around like a rabbit.

"I'd like to make things a little more interesting, draw out their suffering as long as possible. With the traps we have now, they either die on the spot or cease their screaming all too quickly."

Next thing I knew, I was livin' on the nobleman's estate and crankin' out man-traps for him. Then one day, the Knights o' the Church stormed in and sentenced me to death as his accomplice. No real surprise there. I *was* complicit in his crimes. The nobleman's hunger had kept on growin' more and more intense, and I'd kept on pumpin' out more and more traps to satisfy it—and then some. I learned how to torture people. Ran experiments, too. These two hands a mine are drenched in blood.

But in the end, the gallows never came for me. Fortunately? I wonder. Hard to say.

My life was "saved" by the Church—I got bought for my skills in trap-makin' and man-huntin', and was made an Arbiter of Dea Ignis. The training was so grueling, I woulda leapt at the nearest noose. But they wouldn't let me take myself out. I'd a lost my damn mind if I hadn't learned how to forget the pain. Fact is, loadsa my fellow convicts did end up dyin'.

Then, suddenly, the agony I thought would go on forever ended. They handed me my clerical robes and a new name: "the Tyrant."

Kill them.

That was the Church's order. I had a new master, but my work was the same. Officially, we were witch hunters, but in reality Dea Ignis was nothin' more than a hammer to crush anyone who got in the Church's way. I killed, and killed, and killed, then killed some more. Anyone they ordered me to—man or woman, adult or child.

I'd always had a soft spot for different devices powered by some sorta mechanism. They were even kinda beautiful to me, the springs and cogs that served their purpose without a will of their own.

Once someone put out the order to kill, my own will didn't enter into it; I could just be the tool that got the job done. And I found pride, joy, and fun in the beauty of functionin' as a tool. That was the Tyrant's way of life, with an aesthetic all its own.

"Still, nothin's really changed. Only difference is, my boss is some witch's servant 'stead o' the anti-witch faction this time around."

A wagon. It smelled like horses, and he'd been covered with hay after he was tossed into the back, so Saybil was pretty sure of that, at least. He was bound, gagged, and stuffed inside a sack. He'd actually come around by the time the sack came into play, but merely regaining consciousness didn't exactly open a path to meaningful resistance...

If he could cast spells without incantations, Saybil probably would've been able to escape this sort of predicament. For the moment, though, all he could do was listen to his kidnapper's monologue and try to keep from vomiting at

the rocking of the wagon.

A Dea Ignis Arbiter—that's how he identified himself. He's got to be that same "Tyrant" who attacked us last time. But what did he mean about his boss?

A witch's servant ordered him to get Saybil?

Well, makes sense.

There were probably innumerable witches who'd pay any price to get ahold of Saybil, once they learned of his unique capabilities. The realization finally dawned on him: *Huh, I guess that's why I should've been practicing magic—so I could protect myself from that kind of threat.* He'd been warned before, but there had always been a part of him that thought, *Nobody would actually want to kidnap me.*

Or at least, that's what a part of him had *wanted* to think. He hated the way the alternative made him feel. He resisted the idea that anyone might take an interest in him, and was only able to relax when he reminded himself of his own worthlessness. But he couldn't exactly maintain that line now that he'd actually been kidnapped at a witch's behest.

Soon, Kudo and Hort and their professors would surely try to rescue him. And in the process, someone would get hurt.

Ugh, I hate this, he thought. *People are gonna suffer, and it'll be my fault—again.*

As soon as the thought hit him, he realized there was something strange about it.

"Again"? What does that mean?

Saybil had only very recently learned of his extraordinary stores of mana. Had that unlimited wellspring actually brought anyone to harm since then?

Suddenly, Saybil felt like he was choking. He was overwhelmed by the delusion that his exhalations were filling up every nook and cranny of the sack, allowing no room for fresh air. He wanted to take in a deep breath, but the gag in his mouth, with a rope wound tightly over it, made even normal breathing an excruciating chore. He managed to breathe a bit through his nose, but the sense of suffocation grew ever worse. The rough rope around Saybil's arms creaked as he writhed, scraping away at his skin and leaving a painful burn behind, but showed no sign of loosening.

The wagon jolted. Saybil was tossed a few inches into the air, banging his head as he came down.

This is agony.

I want to scream, but nothing comes out.

I'm about to pass out.

That's when it happened.

—My poor Saybil. All because you were born this way.

The voice echoed inside his head, and a woman appeared and began caressing his cheek amid the darkness.

—What an awful father he was, to burden you so.

The aroma of fragrant herbs and the murmur of a gurgling stream embraced Saybil, and the next thing he knew, he stood only as tall as a tiny child, in a

small, humble cottage.

It's a witch's shop, Saybil thought when he caught sight of the motley assortment of tools, much like those at Zero's place. This shop was several degrees less refined, more cluttered, and terribly simple, but...

"...Mother," Saybil whispered. He shouldn't have been able to speak, but the words came out nonetheless.

This must be a dream, then. Perhaps he'd lost consciousness, unable to bear the suffocating agony any longer. Saybil hardly ever dreamed. And he'd never before experienced a lucid awareness like this when he did.

As if responding to Saybil's whisper, the woman—Saybil's mother—curved her lips into a smile.

—Come on, no long faces. You'll be fine as long as you hide in here.

Listen closely, Saybil. I need you to remember this.

You are never to approach a witch with eyes like yours.

She'll take everything from you.

Saybil's mother took his hand, pushed him into a wardrobe, and closed the doors from the outside. He pressed himself against them, peeking through the crack to watch what happened.

Saybil started trembling. He knew. He knew exactly what would come next.

In the blink of an eye, the rustic cabin wall exploded and a figure barged in. It was a woman, cloaked in an aura so strange that Saybil knew at first glance she was a witch. Saybil's mother put up what feeble resistance she could, but the

interloper threw her to the floor. In her hand, she held a hatchet for chopping firewood, which had been left out in the yard.

Saybil hadn't been able to wrap his brain around any of this; he remembered only being terrified of that hatchet. As a child, he'd had no inkling what witches were capable of, but he intuitively recognized the blade could mean death. The witch knew that, too.

—Hide behind that barrier if you like, but I'll just find you anyway, even if I have to blow this whole cabin to bits to do it. Come on out—if you don't want to let your mother die, that is.

Saybil's eyes were glued to the hatchet as she spoke. He'd been foolish. Too young, too naive, too cowardly, Saybil did as she asked and poked his head out from the wardrobe.

Flash.

The hatchet went hurtling down—toward where Saybil's mother lay. A fountain of blood erupted into the air, and her head rolled away across the floor. He heard an earsplitting scream—his own. Saybil threw himself on his mother's severed head, trying hopelessly to stick it back onto her body.

The witch grabbed his arm.

—Come, now. Show me.

The witch touched Saybil's chest. Her fingers effortlessly sunk inside, then wrapped themselves around his heart.

–Ahh, just the slightest touch and I feel the power. This is it–this is everything.

The enraptured smile on her face suddenly contorted into a grimace. Fearfully, she released her hold on Saybil's heart and tried to pull away from him, but Saybil held on, sobbing and wailing in consternation. He gripped her so tightly that his nails cut into her skin and drew blood.

The witch screamed.

–Stop! Unhand me! Let me go-o-o-o!

Blood streamed from her eyes and nose, and she thrust Saybil away violently. He watched from the ground as the witch's body dissolved into a molten mess that mixed with the blood gushing from his mother's corpse. What remained of the witch's liquified body boiled and seethed in its final death throes, leaving Saybil all alone in the cabin.

Aahhh...

I remember.

That's right—they'd died because of him: his mother, and the witch who'd murdered her.

How come I haven't remembered this before? This tragedy I caused? I can't believe I managed to block it out and live my life like everything was hunky-dory.

Ohh, wait—I see. It's only because I forgot that I was able to survive.

“Oi! What the hell happened?! Wake up—hey!”

A sudden, savage slap to the face snapped Saybil back to reality. He opened his eyes, gasping as the cool night air filled his lungs. He continued breathing raggedly, eyes still wide, until he heard a sigh of relief from somewhere above him.

“Dammit, you scared the hell outta me,” the Tyrant said, peering down at Saybil. “I’m meant ta bring ya in alive this time—die on me, and *my* life ain’t worth shit.”

“Uhhh...” His head still spinning, the mage quickly surveyed his surroundings, frantically trying to piece together the situation. He remembered being kidnapped at the dorm’s back door. And now he was in the bed of a horse-drawn wagon. They hadn’t arrived anywhere, though; they were simply stopped by the side of some nondescript road. Add to that what the Tyrant had just said...

“Did I...stop breathing...?”

“Near enough. You suddenly started screaming bloody murder and convulsing.”

That must’ve freaked him out.

Panicked, the Tyrant had stopped the cart, dragged Saybil out of the sack, removed his gag, and slapped his face to wake him up.

“Sorry for all the trouble...” Saybil apologized reflexively, then frowned and said, “Wait, is that weird?”

The Tyrant gave him a dubious look. “Apologizin’ to yer kidnapper, you mean?”

“Right... Yeah. I thought it was a little weird myself.”

“You sick or somethin’? Tell me now if ya need yer meds. Don’t want you keelin’ over before we get where we’re goin’.”

“Umm, I’m not exactly sick... Unless amnesia counts as a disease... I just remembered something, and it kind of surprised me...”

In fact, he was still deeply shaken. Saybil couldn’t actually prove what he’d seen was anything more than a dream, yet he felt oddly certain it was his long-lost memory.

“Um, excuse me, Mister Tyrant.”

“Sure you need the ‘Mister’ there?”

“Is that weird?”

“I mean, I don’t give two shits either way, but...”

“Um, about the person who told you to get me... I don’t think they should go through with it. I’m pretty sure it won’t turn out the way they want.”

“Hanh?”

“I...think I’d probably...”

...kill them, too.

A moment of dumbfounded silence, then the Tyrant threw his head back and guffawed. “You’re a funny little fella, ain’tcha. Right, right, now that you

mention it, you do got the look of a real murderer. But, you ain't no soldier. So, what, you accidentally killed someone? And ya regret it, to boot? Hard to take a punk like that seriously, even if he swears up and down he's a dangerous individual."

"Huh? Oh... No, that's not what I meant..." Saybil panicked at suddenly being chided for putting on airs. "It's just, I don't think I'll meet the expectations of whoever hired you, so I thought maybe you could, you know, let me go..."

"You tellin' me you know who I'm workin' for?"

"Oh... No... I..."

"It's that wolfman, with the white fur."

"Huh? Holdem? But why would—aghbff!"

The Arbiter suddenly gripped Saybil's head and shoved him back into the straw, ending the conversation.

"Enough chit-chat. We dawdled too long, and now they've caught up ta us."

"...Wha?"

"I was sure nobody'd notice one missing brat 'til mornin'... But that village a yers is more closely guarded than I thought," the Tyrant grumbled, reaching for the enormous hammer he'd tossed into the bed of the wagon.

Then Saybil heard it, too: hoofbeats and spinning wagon wheels; an argument.

"Hort! You *did* say you knew howta drive these things, didn't you?! *Didn't you?!'*"

"We're moving, aren't we?! See, I'm crushing it! We're flying! See?!"

"No, dumbass, they're runnin' wild!"

“The horses are just freaked out 'cos you're in the wagon! If you're gonna complain, you can get off! Just hop off and run!”

“Hey, look up ahead! We caught 'em! Stop the wagon!”

“I-I can't stop it so quicklyyyy!”

Their horse and cart caught up to Saybil's and was about to rush right past, but Hort and Kudo leapt off at the last minute and somehow managed to find their feet in front of the hammer-wielding Tyrant.

“You okay, dude?!”

“Sayb! We came to rescue you!”

Their appearance inspired no confidence—at *all*. Thanks to the way they'd thrown themselves from the wagon, they made their grand entrance already somewhat injured. They were covered in mud, beat up, and far too inexperienced. To top it all off, neither Hort nor Kudo yet had any idea what was going on. Their eyes grew wide as they caught sight of the Tyrant standing beside Saybil, and they exchanged glances, a mix of confusion and anxiety playing across their faces.

“Wh-Why is the Tyrant here...?! Wasn't this just some sort of test?! Are we actually in danger?!”

“Either way, doesn't change a damn thing! Test or no, Saybil got kidnapped! So we gotta save him! Right?! ”

“R-R-Right! Yeah! Totally!”

Leveling his massive hammer at Saybil, the Tyrant said, “If you morons were tryin' for a rescue, shoulda come at me with a sneak attack. It's a shame since you just got here 'n' all, but I'm gonna need you to turn back now. Or not, but then I'll hafta crush your little friend's arms and legs, one by one. I suggest you

leave quietly if you want him to get outta this with all his limbs. The little bastard doesn't sprout 'em back as quick as our lizard friend here."

Kudo had once lost his tail and both hands to the Tyrant. And yet, he didn't so much as flinch. In fact—

"Hort, how're you on mana?"

"Great! Plus, Sayb's right there, so I'm in tip-top shape!"

"Yeah? Good, that makes this that much more worthwhile."

Kudo pulled out a knife and, without a second's hesitation, lopped off his own tail. The Tyrant's jaw dropped.

"Hanh? The hell? What kinda freaky pump-me-up is that?!"

"Beastfallen bodies make for the perfect magical offering. Even a shit-for-brains Arbiter like you should know that much," Kudo said, then threw his severed tail to Hort. "Go for it, Hort! Don't hold back!"

"Waah! I-It's still moving! Ugh, it's too fresh, Kudo, it's wriggling in my hand!"

"Shut up already! I put up with the pain, now just get to it, dumbass!"

Hort recited no incantation. Nevertheless, a flaming serpent was already slithering up her body.

In spite of how little confidence they inspired.

In spite of how muddy and beat up they were.

In spite of their lack of experience.

"No way... You weren't half this good last time...!" His face taut, the Tyrant

covered himself in the consecrated cloth that had dispelled Hort's attack during their previous encounter. But a moment later it burst into flames and fell to the ground in ashes, leaving the Arbiter open-mouthed with astonishment.

"Oh, the ropes..." Before he knew it, Saybil's bonds had also been incinerated, setting him free. Hort must have successfully set one Flagis on multiple targets, just as Zero had shown her that afternoon. In the blink of an eye, she'd pulled impossibly far ahead.

We'll be wrenched apart.

The thought shook Saybil to his core, more so even than the trauma he'd remembered or the danger facing them that very moment. He stood up and grabbed the Tyrant's wrist.

"Please don't move. If you so much as flinch, I'll pump your body full of way more mana than it can handle."

"...Outta curiosity, what'd happen if ya did?"

"You'd die in agony, as far as I can tell... Blood would gush from every orifice and your body would melt."

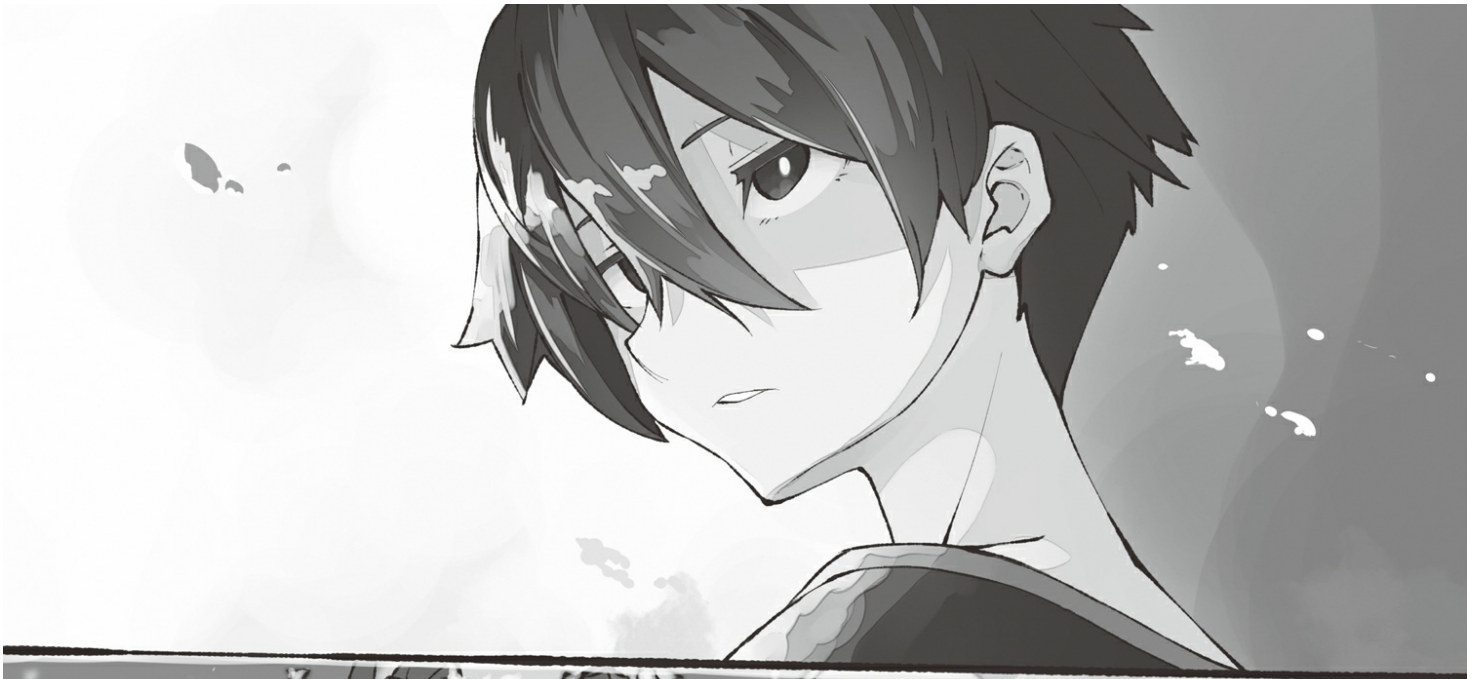
"So?" The Tyrant pulled his captive arm close and glared at Saybil. "Lemme teach ya a lesson, kid, since you clearly don't get it. There's a whole world a difference between making someone die on accident and killing them in cold blood."

"Aye, this spot should do nicely," Los said to herself, tapping the Staff of

Ludens against her shoulder. She was tottering her way through the woods, and the setting sun had long ago disappeared behind the trees.

A touch-me-not carcass (strikingly similar to an animal's) lay on the forest floor, giving off a stench of blood to lure in its prey. Los took a quick look around and spotted spiky thorns—the touch-me-not's seeds—stuck into all the surrounding tree trunks.

“Hmm... According to that illustrated compendium, these scattered seeds must imbibe blood or they shan't bear fruit... It appears, then, that only such spikes as have wounded a creature will fructify, wouldst not say, little Ludens?” Los asked the staff, then rapped its butt against the ground. Several dozen tentacles slithered down from the staff's black orb, plucked the thorns from their trees, and spread them at Los's feet. Of them, only two had begun the transformation from seed-thorn to spherical fruit.



“‘Twould appear even those vile demons took *some* consideration of the natural balance of an ecosystem in their fell work. By the looks of it, the foul things have not yet infested the forest too heavily. My task may well prove less taxing than I’d imagined.” Cackling, Los once again struck the Staff of Ludens’s butt against the ground—much harder, this time. “Ludens, tidy up.”

The dozens of feelers became hundreds, which shot out into the woods in every direction. Their reach did not extend very far, but they nevertheless possessed the power to catch, gather, and snuff out every seed-thorn within range.

Los closed her eyes, then opened them again. In that brief interval, the job was done. The witch looked down at the small mound of thorns before her and grinned.

Using a sleek, handy flint-and-steel contraption she’d come upon in her travels, she sparked a fire with the pull of a trigger. The unholy heap erupted into flames, sending the foul odor of burning meat wafting through the forest.

“A quick loop around the village and another four such cleanses, and we shall finish the job ere morning! A trifling task indeed, to grant me access to the restricted section of the Forbidden Library! Wouldst not agree, little Ludens?”

With a jiggle of the staff, the flames surged then dissipated, scattering only cinders in their wake. The extermination of the touch-me-not that had attacked Saybil and Laios thus completed, Los practically skipped to her next destination, as if declaring that though night had fallen on this forest infested with creeping shadows of calamity, it held no fear for her.

“...Hm? Come to think of it, I do believe there was an apiary nearby.”

As Los had heard it, a frivolous merchant once dumped a swarm of bees on

the village, only for the pollinators to settle down in the forest and, to everyone's surprise, begin producing honey. The villagers maintained a well-balanced relationship with the bees by each year harvesting only one of the flat, honeycomb-filled frames set up within the hollow tree where the busy arthropods had established their hive.

"...Well, this *is* hungry work, after all! I wager the bees would even welcome it, should I take a little lick! In fact, I am something of a queen bee myself!" With that decided, Los raced through the forest in high spirits, her anemia completely forgotten.

Most of the bees would be resting in their hive at night. At least, they should've been, but Los heard a riotous buzzing as she approached their territory. It was the sound of a swarm mad with fury.

Cocking her head, Los spotted someone sprawled out on the ground. Barbs similar to the seed-thorns she had just incinerated peeked out of the fellow's bag. She poked the prostrate miscreant with her toe, soliciting an anguished moan.

He still lives. Precisely why the bees remain so livid...?

Los looked up at the moon, then at the Staff of Ludens. "All becomes clear. I thought it a strange attempt to drive this village toward decimation, employing such half-handed measures and such a scant number of these fell seeds."

In fact, the plan was to sow the seeds over several days, each time at a different location. The culprit crept into the woods this evening as well, only to trespass on the bees' territory and receive the stinging of his life. Whosoever was entrusted with such a dangerous mission must be the basest peon on the lowest rung of the ladder. He might even be a hired hand, unaware of the true nature of his mission. If so, 'twould be a cruelty to abandon him—

“In any event, we may yet glean something from him. Ho there, varlet. Be grateful, for I shall save thee.”

With the power of the Staff of Ludens, transporting a full-grown man posed hardly any trouble at all for Los. While the staff would fatally drain all mana from any who touched it, that risk was nullified so long as Los held it in her hand. As such, it could be bent to perform all manner of feats, just as it now wrapped its black tendrils around the pitiful patsy and carried him along through the air.

“Still, ’tis a hefty burden on the spirit... It feels as if... As if the staff has grown heavier... Wouldst not say, little Ludens? ’Tis a taxing load for thee as well, I expect.”

The witch at length delivered the agonized man to the village, grumbling all the while. *Now then, to the clinic*, she thought, surveying her surroundings, only to spot another figure collapsed on the ground. She frowned. Approaching, she took a closer look and saw pale fur glimmering silver beneath the moonlight.

“A pity. He’s rather a comely fellow in sleep...” Muttering to herself, Los poked the prostrate Holdem’s head with her toe. “Oi, Third-Rate. Wherefore dost thou slumber here?”

“Hngh...! Hnah... Huh...?” Holdem’s eyes cracked open, momentarily awash in dazed confusion, then he sprang to his feet. “Hanh?! Why the hell was I sleeping here...?!”

“What? Art thou so deep in thy cups? Rather bold for one entrusted by Mercenary and Mud-Black with the safety of the village children.”

“No, I was just having the brats show me to a vacant house... But then this Uls guy showed up and started shoutin’ that Saybil had been kidnapped or

something... The brats went after him, and I tried to stop them, but then—”

“Ha-hah!” Los exclaimed. “Thou wert put to sleep—with magic.”

“Magic...? But...they didn’t recite any incantation.”

“They are a talented lot.”

“Ugh.” Holdem grimaced.

Another scan of the area revealed Uls, the herald of Saybil’s predicament, asleep beneath the boughs of a tree. Though he must also have attempted to stop the two reckless apprentices, he’d received much kinder treatment than Holdem, who they’d left splayed out in the middle of the street.

“So, what of young Sayb?”

“Like I said, he got kidnapped—ah!” Holdem yelped. “Shit, this is bad!”

“Why the panic? ’Twas thy scheme, was it not?”

“Hngh...?!” Holdem was clearly a little taken aback. “...What was?”

“That he be abducted.”

“...What makes you think that?”

“Come now, dissembler! Given didst come all this way, thou must have intended to create *some* kind of emergency to test whether the apprentices might resolve it! A vainly foolish plan!” With the index finger she’d extended in the course of her diatribe, Los poked the tip of Holdem’s snout, hard. “I, for one, had assumed thou wouldst attempt some other nonsense, if ’twas true thou hadst naught to do with the Remnants of Disaster... And my fledglings certainly suspected thee from the moment thou didst set foot in the village. My little magelings are much stronger, shrewder, and more determined than thou canst imagine.”

“...Aren’t you worried I might actually do something to Saybil?” Holdem asked, swatting Los’s hand away.

The witch grinned. “Not in the least.”

“Why not?”

“Because Sorena would not approve.”

The great Sorena, unduly departed, had been Holdem’s master and the woman he loved, as well as Los’s dear friend.

All the venom seemed to drain from the beastfallen in the face of Los’s broad smile. “Albus doubted me.”

“Nay, I dare say not. That spring chicken does not possess the capacity to delegate work to one she mistrusts. Like as not, she worried for thee. You two are a touch too close for your own good, like as unto father and daughter. That breeds obstinate pride—in both of you.”

Sighing, Holdem gazed up at the moon. “Father and daughter, huh?” he repeated, seeming not entirely displeased at the idea. “Geez... I couldn’t get Mercenary, or Mud-Black, or even you to be at all wary of me. Kind of a letdown, ya know?”

“Our students harbored such suspicions in our stead, did they not? Now, wherein lies the problem?”

“...I used the Tyrant.”

“How now?” Los asked reflexively.

“I’m telling you, I brought the Tyrant here and told him I’d commute his death sentence if he could bring at least one of the students back to the Academy. I was supposed to be keeping an eye on him... But here I am.”

“Oh hoh,” Los replied. “Quite the predicament indeed. Uls!”

“Huah?!” Uls jumped up with a start, and Los dumped the man she’d found in the forest into his arms. “Take this malefactor to the clinic for me. This third-rate manservant and I shall pursue the students. Come along, Holdem! I’ll show thee the way. Follow me!”

“Don’t get all high and mighty with me! I don’t take orders from you. An’ I didn’t ask for yer help...”

“Aargh! How utterly heartless thou art! I, too, wish to play a role in what promises to be the climactic scene! But never mind that—let us make haste! My fledglings have not yet steeled themselves for true life-or-death struggle!”

3

“Toldja, didn’t I? Don’t matter how awesome their weapons may be, your average brat’ll *always* flinch when it comes time to kill. Meanin’ Hort’s the only one I need ta keep an eye on. Seems like *she’d* kill me at the drop of a hat. Then again, she ain’t the type to ever leave one of her precious little friends behind. And that’s all I need ta know—” The Tyrant smirked. “—to win. Watch.”

After a tragic defeat comes regret at one’s own foolishness. Saybil could indeed kill someone with a touch. But the Tyrant was spot on: he didn’t have the guts to actually do it. He wasn’t prepared to slay a compliant enemy after securing the upper hand. And so, in a battle he could’ve easily won with an outpouring of mana, Saybil faltered. His dream—his *memory* of the distant past—flashed again before his eyes, and, confronted with the image of that witch wailing as she melted away, he simply couldn’t take the next step.

And just like that, the Tyrant had Saybil in the palm of his hand. First, he crushed the mage's wrist with his iron grip. Saybil screamed and crumpled to the ground, but the Tyrant dragged him back up to a sitting position and stomped on his knees, pulverizing them both. That was enough to unnerve Hort, who instantly leapt forward to catch Saybil as the Tyrant hurled him through the air. She'd hardly breathed a sigh of relief, however, when a vicious blow from the Tyrant's fist sent both her and Saybil flying smack into a tree, knocking them out. Only Kudo was left to square off against the Tyrant, one-on-one. He never had a chance, though, and in the end the former Arbiter subdued all three apprentices without once turning to his trusty hammer.

"Awright... I'll be gettin' back to work, then, if ya don't mind. If yer gonna blame anyone, blame that wolf—Holdem, or whatever the hell his name is. I ain't nothin' but a tool, doin' as I'm told. Even if you kill me, another one'll just pop up to take my place."

The Tyrant peeled Saybil from his unconscious embrace with Hort, then chucked him back onto the wagon bed. Glancing at the young man's broken knees and swollen wrist, he chuckled indulgently to himself. "...Well, he only said ta bring him back 'alive.' All within the bounds of the game. They'll just fix him back up with magic anyway."

The next instant, an uncontrollable chill of fear coursed through him. Almost instinctively, he reached for his hammer—only for his arm to be lopped off like some flimsy branch, flying through the air before plopping back to earth a little ways away.

"Hanh?"

Caught flat-footed, the Tyrant gawked at his own severed limb. The pause cost him dearly. *Shit*, he thought, but it was too late—he was already caught. He

found himself bound by invisible, impossibly thin threads. And the Tyrant knew exactly who controlled them.

“The Mask...?! You bastard, didn’t you leave for the city?!”

“Aren’t we well informed.”

Out of the trees strolled a man clad in clerical robes matching the Tyrant’s, a massive scythe held in his hands: the village priest, known as “the Mask” during his Arbiter days.

“I’ve since returned. Our mouse made a fuss about some pest that had wormed its way into the village, you see,” he explained. “Goodness... You put me through quite the ordeal, you know, what with the village so shorthanded and all. It takes half a day by horse cart to reach the city, yet I was obliged to make the journey here in half that time...”

Amid his griping, the Mask lightly flicked his wrist. The lanterns hanging from the Tyrant’s wagon all shattered simultaneously, and darkness fell heavy around them. The faint moonlight revealed only the barest silhouettes.

“Now...finally, I can see.”

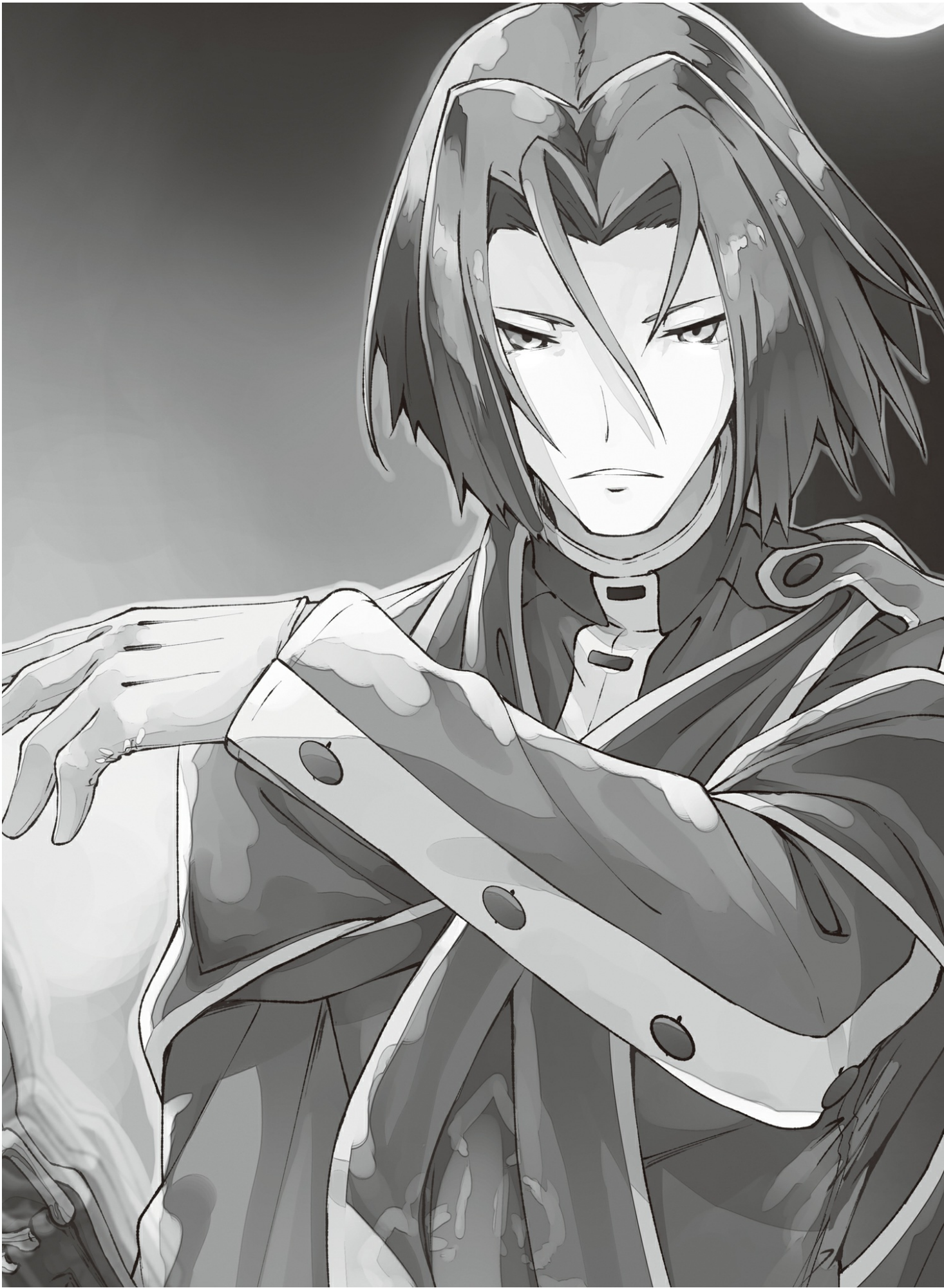
The Mask’s light-sensitive eyes were of no use in the light of day. When he removed his blindfold after nightfall, however, he could see in the dark like a nocturnal animal. The former Arbiter’s gaze darted across the three unconscious apprentices. Neither Hort nor Kudo seemed severely injured, but Saybil’s wrist had been crushed and both his knees were bent at unnatural angles.

His eyebrow shot up. “One arm wasn’t enough, then...? In that case, we’ll move onto your legs. But never fear; I’ll take you alive. There’s a great deal of information I wish to elicit from you. Under normal circumstances, amputating

both lower limbs would mean death—but it's 'all within the bounds of the game,' wouldn't you agree? Since it can be fixed up with magic and all."

The Mask lifted his arm, then brought it down in a leisurely gesture. The invisible strings trapping the Tyrant tilted his body back unsteadily, then slammed it shoulder-first into the ground. Only the bottom halves of his legs, tragically parted from the thighs just above the knee, remained standing all on their own.

There was no blood. The Mask's threads had stopped all bleeding even as they made their incisions. There was pain, however—if not enough to elicit a cry from the Tyrant. All Dea Ignis Arbiters underwent grueling training to numb themselves to physical trauma. The Tyrant simply thought, *Guess it's not my day.*



“How’m I s’posed ta stand a chance against the Mask in a pitch-black forest? Even if I *did* want to run, gonna be hard now... An’ to top it all off,” he added with a wry smile, “there’s reinforcements comin’. I’m tappin’ out. Go ahead ’n’ kill me or torture me or whatever floats your boat.”

The new arrival turned out to be a hulking, heavily-armed beastfallen carrying a woman with silver hair.

“See? Told ya the priest’d be here. He had the pipsqueak with him; there was no way he wouldn’t find out.”

“Quit grumbling, Mercenary. It behooves us to take extra precautions. And just look at this catastrophe. The priest could not have brought all the children home safely on his own. Above all else, had we not arrived, our blood-starved priest might have julienned the assailant.”

“Looks like he’s already been given a rough chop.” The beastfallen known only as Mercenary plucked the Tyrant’s severed arm out of the dirt and studied it. “Damn, the blood vessels really are perfectly round,” he chuckled.

“Rather choice words for two rushing late to the scene.”

“Nah, we weren’t rushin’, as such. My witch here said the wagon carryin’ Saybil was close by so let’s go take a look, and she wouldn’t shut up about it, so we just popped by on our hunt for the Remnants of Disaster.”

“The very definition of rushing to the scene... Do consider who you’re attempting to deceive.”

Just then, two more late arrivals dashed up.

“Halt, halt, haaalt! Desist, you barbarians! How dare you band together to torment the feeble! I shall not permit it!”

“Hoo-boy. Took out all the students, huh? That Tyrant’s stronger than I gave him credit for.”

It was the Dawn Witch Loux Krystas and Holdem, the Tyrant’s employer. With these additions, everyone who could be counted among the village’s fighting force was assembled in one place. Given the situation, it was obviously overkill. The tables thus turned, the Tyrant alone could hardly hope to pose a threat. In which case the group’s collective wrath naturally shifted to another target. Namely...

“Oi, Pooch. Care to explain how the hell you know this guy’s name? He’s a stranger to you, right? You haven’t met before or anythin’, *right?*”

“Given the extent of the students’ injuries, you cannot possibly intend to claim this is an examination for the Royal Academy, correct?”

“I am exceedingly displeased,” Zero declared. “Depending on the manner of your reply, I may deliver your head unto Mooncaller at the Academy—*after* giving you an agonizing death.”

Chuckling meekly, Holdem turned to Loux Krystas for protection.

4

“In sum...”

They were back in the village. Having driven the injured students and Tyrant to the clinic by wagon, they began by treating the severely wounded Saybil.

With Holdem, who was dangerously close to being drawn and quartered by the village representatives, hiding behind her, Los explained at length the

course of events that had led to this moment.

“According to this third-rate dolt, the whole ordeal was an inspection-cum-emergency drill intended to assess our capacity to protect our students, rather than to test the apprentices themselves. He had evidently planned various stratagems to divide the village’s defensive force before unleashing the Tyrant. His visit happened to coincide with the anti-witch faction’s attack, however, which he imprudently deemed an opportune chance to set his plan in motion. Our students had begun harboring deep misgivings toward this blasted beastfallen from his first unspeakably suspect appearance, of course, and deemed him an enemy as soon as they learned of the Tyrant’s attack, removing him from the battle before it began in earnest. As a result, Holdem failed to prevent the Tyrant’s egregious violence and only reached the students once it was too late.”

“How incompetent *are* you?”

“Incompetent bastard.”

The priest and Mercenary lambasted Holdem in unison as soon as Los finished her account.

The lupine beastfallen had no other choice but to timidly accept the barrage of abuse. “Yes. I’m an incompetent, third-rate manservant...”

“If all you wanted was to test the village, you didn’t have to hire the Tyrant! Why the hell’d you bring *him* into it?!”

“Well... I figured using someone who’d already attacked the students once would add a sense of urgency.”

“You should have prioritized safety precautions before worrying about dramatic flair.”

“I tried to...but the students have gotten so much stronger than I’d expected...”

“Can it, Pooch. We’ll catch your stupid.” Mercenary glowered as one might at vermin infesting a pantry, and Holdem shrunk into himself beneath the larger beastfallen’s withering glare.

Perhaps out of pity, Zero offered the poor fellow a lifeline.

“There is no use in berating the dog. Furthermore, had this not been an inspection by the Royal Academy, we might have lost one—if not all—of our students. We were only able to retrieve them safely because the Tyrant had been ordered to kidnap, not kill. If it were otherwise, he might have slaughtered them all. Our negligence put our apprentices in grave danger. We have no choice but to admit our defenses proved altogether too vulnerable.”

The priest and Mercenary clicked their tongues in vexation.

“Maybe, but it’s not every day we get attacked on two fronts, right?”

“No, Mercenary. We have merely been fortunate up to this point. In truth, we were unaware of the Remnants of Disaster set loose in our woods until the wolf arrived. These two attacks only *happened* to overlap.”

“That’s, well...” Mercenary lifted his gaze to the ceiling. As a former sellsword, he had seen his fair share of battlefields plagued by unlucky turn after unlucky turn. He was not optimistic enough to deny the idea that good fortune had helped secure their peace thus far.

“I, too, was careless. It occurred not to me to doubt Holdem’s honeyed tongue, nor should I have ventured into the woods until one of you returned. I did not sufficiently consider the possibility this village might come under attack—a failing I now regret,” Los admitted, her shoulders slumping

uncharacteristically.

“Nevertheless, Dawn, we have your foray into the forest to thank for capturing an invaluable source of information alive. Had you not found him tonight, he might well have been devoured by wolves before morning. From the perspective of our investigation into the anti-witch faction, at least, you did the right thing.”

“Th-Thou wouldst defend me, Mud-Black...?! What a lovely lass! Rejoice, for I grant thee pardon to embrace me!”

“I need no such recompense.”

Utterly rejected, Los turned despondent once again, and without other recourse, hugged the Staff of Ludens instead.

“Our lack of fighting strength does seem to be a serious issue,” the priest observed. “If, for example, two colluding forces attacked, thereby obliging us to divide our defenses, this village could conceivably burn to the ground in a single night. We might yet manage to fend off our assailants if we focused only on ourselves and abandoned the nearby villages, but should we hope to protect our neighbors as we did this time, we would come up severely short.”

“True enough, but the only reason something so nasty got smuggled into these woods is *because* we’re here, right?” Mercenary shot back. “We can’t exactly leave everyone around us in the lurch when we’re the ones that got ‘em mixed up in this mess in the first place.”

“Indeed,” agreed Zero. “We established this village in the South, where witches find no warm welcome, in part to prove that life with us around provides convenience and safety. Should our presence instead intensify the dangers people face, and should we abandon them to fend for themselves, we

will only turn public opinion against us.”

“In which case, we have no option but to expand our battle-ready ranks...”
The priest trailed off.

Los lived an itinerant life, and no one could predict when she might leave the village. To say nothing of Holdem, who would return to the Royal Academy of Magic in a matter of days.

“Excuse me... I have a proposal, if I may...” Holdem raised his hand trepidatiously. “About that...” Here he pointed at the Tyrant. “If you’ll have him, I’d be more than happy to leave him in your service...”

“Hanh?” came the incredulous response from none other than the Tyrant himself. Legless and missing one arm, he’d been laid out on a cot, but now, with some difficulty, he used his remaining arm to push himself up. “B-Back up, that wasn’t the deal!! You said you’d commute my death sentence if I finished the job—”

“Which you didn’t! You really think you’ve got a right to talk back?! We might’ve commuted your sentence, but we were never gonna be able to let you roam free. Either way, getting this village to accept you is the only thing that’ll keep you from the gallows now,” Holdem barked.

The Tyrant simply flopped back down on his cot, as if to say, *Suit yourself*.

“As you all know, this bastard’ll take orders from anyone. You may not love the idea, but he could be a useful pawn. Plus, you’ve already got one Arbiter in town, so I figured he might be just what the doctor ordered.”

“Do not lump me in with this filth,” the priest cautioned Holdem from behind his blindfold. “You will not live to regret it.”

“My apologies, sir,” the beastfallen whimpered, clutching his tail.

“However,” the priest continued, resuming his usual nonchalance, “the Tyrant could indeed bolster the village’s defenses. None who know his name would dare approach any position he commands. He is a blacksmith, an artisan, and a brilliant trap-master.”

“No matter how useful he might be, we could never trust him.”

“Hold, Mercenary. Even if we cannot trust him, he may yet be worth employing. We are in no position to be choosy. I am in favor.”

“Well, I mean... If you say so, then...I’m fine with it.” Mercenary looked from Zero to Los. “Might I interest you in sharing *your* thoughts, Granny?”

“Who, me? Thou wouldst seek mine opinion?”

“I’m lookin’ for some elderly wisdom.”

Instantly, Los brightened. “Hmm, indeed, ’tis not a bad notion. However, this man has earned far too much animosity from my fledglings. ’Twill be a turbulent transition. Art thou prepared for that eventuality?”

“Ahh, yeah... I see what you mean.”

“We’ll simply have to ask them to listen to reason. They were not dispatched to this village to play at friendship with anyone and everyone, after all.”

“And yet, Father, interpersonal strife can lead even great militaries to their demise. Order them to be reasonable and so they shall, but take the emotions of youth too lightly and thou shalt pay dearly for it. Such is my prediction—a prediction of the sort that never goes astray.”

“Then what would you suggest we do?”

Los grinned. “Knowest thou how two drunkards share wine without discord?”

“Why the riddle...? One drunkard divides the liquor in a way acceptable to

both parties, then the other picks whichever portion he prefers. Correct?”

“Precisely.” Los snapped her fingers. “Accept the Tyrant into the village, and let the magelings decide his fate. That shall resolve all.”

+ + +

“Noooope! Not happening! Over my dead body! Just hang that waste of space and let’s call it a day!”

The next morning, the adults called the three students to the tavern for breakfast and informed them of the previous night’s resolution. To no one’s surprise, Hort raised the most spirited objection.

“I think I’d be okay with it... I mean, he was working under Holdem’s orders this time, too, right?”

“You’re such a pushover, Sayb! This is the kinda guy who’ll do, like, *anything* he’s told, you know?! And after all he did for the Church, he flipped just like *that*—he’ll *definitely* do it again! I’m telling you, *nothing* good will come of keeping that kinda scumbag in the village!”

“To be fair, you also turned on the Church,” Kudo pointed out.

Hort exploded. “Why do you always, always say the *last* thing a person wants to hear?! That’s! Got! *NOTHING!* To do with this!”

“Huh...? I’m the bad guy here...?”

“And let’s not forget! Dea Ignis Arbiters are all condemned criminals to begin with! Try and tell me you don’t think they should be executed, Kudo!”

“No, I mean, I’m basically with you there, but...” His scales flashing a

complicated shade of green, Kudo shot the priest a sideways glance. “Follow that logic and we’d have to execute him, too...”

“Nooo! Not Father! You can’t kill hiiiiiiim!”

The usually meek Lily leapt out in front of the priest to protect him, at which Hort unknit her brows and weakly added, “He’s nothing like the Tyrant...”

The priest himself rejected that assertion, however. “I am fundamentally no different from the Tyrant. I, too, murdered many witches and sorcerers at the Church’s bidding. And I cannot deny the possibility that some of my victims were good people.”

“B-But...! But...the Tyrant attacked us! He tried to kill us! Are you asking me to forgive him?! Not a chance!”

“There is no need to forgive him, antlered one,” Zero said gently.

“...Huh?” Hort faltered.

“Your enmity for him is yours alone. No one has the right to deny you it,” the witch continued. “If it is revenge you seek, you are free to exact it however you see fit. However, there is one thing you must not forget: the reason the Church began to hunt mages—witches, as we were once called—in the first place.” Zero spoke then more gravely, and more quietly, than before. “Witches slaughtered innocent people. That was what started the conflict with the Church... Though perhaps you don’t learn that at the Academy.”

“Oh, no, we do. We covered the history of war and peace between the Church and the witches,” Saybil interjected.

“I see,” Zero nodded. “Then you understand. We witches and mages continue to pay for the wicked deeds of our forebears, even now. The unspeakable harm they caused fuels suspicion of us, and a thirst for vengeance. That is what the

Church is currently attempting to reform. *Leave the past behind*, they tell their parishioners. You, of all people, must know how incredibly unjust such an order would feel to those who have lost loved ones at the hands of witches. And yet, that is precisely what our presence is imposing upon our neighbors. And why the anti-witch faction hires the Tyrant and his ilk.”

Wincing, Hort shot a look at the corner of the tavern where the Tyrant watched the conversation unfold from a seat on the floor.

“The Tyrant has been ordered to atone for his crimes by serving our village. We have also been granted the authority to execute him should he harm anyone in our community. With that in mind, you must now consider the purpose of and justification for executing him on the spot. If you proceed because you personally cannot abide him, that is no different than a witch hunt. If you nevertheless stand by that decision—and can be completely confident you will not regret it—then by all means, have your revenge. We all know his character. No one will blame you.”

Hort bit her lip. “Th-That’s not it...! I’m not out for revenge...! But, the Tyrant has killed loads of people, not just witches!! He doesn’t think twice about murdering people! With someone like him here, we’ll all be in danger! We don’t have to execute him, but can you all really tell me you don’t want him gone?!”

“Well, if we’re gonna go down that road, I can’t even count the number of heads I’ve taken...” Mercenary said in a subdued voice, leaning on the counter with his chin resting on his hands. “War was my bread and butter. And I wasn’t goin’ up against criminals or anything, just hired soldiers who had families waitin’ for ’em back home. But killing them didn’t bother me one bit.”

“It’s...It’s different on the *battlefield*! He went to a normal village...and killed all these innocent children...just because they *might* be witches!!”

“Unfortunately,” the priest cut in with a sigh, “if that is what the Church ordained, an Arbiter would have no standing to refuse. And many witches do in fact take on a juvenile appearance. Loux Krystas here is a perfect example.”

Los smiled wryly. “Well, I for one do not believe thee incorrect, young Hort. And yet, even as that confounded Albus said, I am a dangerous witch. And my dearest Ludens, otherwise known as the Witch Eater, has taken the lives of countless of my kind. I would have no right to grumble should relations of the staff’s victims come for my life in return.” Los chuckled and gave Hort a grin. “One day, I may be executed by those who bear a grudge against me, or my staff destroyed by someone who believes my little Ludens to be dangerous. And I believe such revenge would be justified. Is that not more or less what thou art trying to say?”

“N-No!” Hort practically shrieked. “There’s no justifiable reason for *you* to be killed, Professor Los! I mean, you’re so nice, and smart, and fun, and—”

“Careful, Hort,” Kudo cut in. “Think before you talk. Sounds like you’re about to say that it doesn’t matter how many people the people / care about have killed.”

Hort slammed her clenched fists on the table. Her face had flushed crimson, and tears welled in her eyes. “*I know!* That’s ‘cos it *is* what I’m trying to say! That’s what I want to believe!”

“Damn, don’t take it out on me...”

“How are you so okay with this?! That monster did such awful things to you!”

“I wouldn’t say I’m ‘okay with it,’ but...if he won’t attack us anymore, and he says he’ll be on our side, then I guess I don’t exactly feel the need to kill him...”

“But you can’t trust any of that! He might come after you again!”

“And if he does, we can execute him then. Next time he tries, he’s a dead man. You’ll see to that, I’m pretty sure.”

Hort stared vacantly at Kudo. Then, scowling with all she had, she pointed at Saybil. “But, what if he attacks Sayb while I’m not around? He’d be toast!”

“Yeah, can’t argue with you there.”

“Sorry I’m so useless...”

“Nooo! That’s not the point... You should all treat this a little more like the very real threat that it totally is! How can you be all flowers and rainbows about this? I feel like I’m just throwing my own little tantrum over here!”

“No shit. That’s ’cos you are. Face it, you’re the only one who’s against this.”

“Kudo, that’s peer pressure,” Saybil scolded. “Not cool.”

“Fine, you wanna go and hang him just because this is a pain in the ass?”

“You love taking arguments to the extreme, don’t you?”

“Arghh... Graah...! All right, fine—I’ll supervise the Tyrant!” Hort cried, still on the verge of tears. “He’ll live here so Mercenary can keep an eye on him! And during the day he’ll answer to me. I’ll *really* put him to work! Happy?!”

“Hanh? He’s gonna live in my tavern...?!” Mercenary half lunged over the bar at the realization he’d suddenly got the short end of the stick.

“Well, Lily’s in the chapel, and if the Tyrant took her hostage, the priest would be useless!”

“Neither Lily nor I are quite so senseless, I’ll have you know...”

“Okay, then the chapel works, too...”

“On second thought, I’m a senseless man who would be useless if Lily were

taken hostage,” the priest said, turning to avoid Lily’s accusatory glare while lying through his teeth in order to push the Tyrant back onto Mercenary.

“But I leave the tavern at night from time to time, too, ya know...”

“Then you can just lock him in the storehouse or something!”

“O-Oh... Well...” In the end, Mercenary succumbed to Hort’s pressure, and, ears drooping in defeat, agreed to set up one of the guest rooms for the Tyrant to use.



Hort sank into a chair, still fuming, and Los reached out to give her a few reassuring pats on the head.

“’Twas a difficult decision thou didst make, young Hort.”

“...Not really. It was just, everyone was against me, so...”

“I know, Hort. Thou hast the cleverness and presence of mind to judge for thyself what is right and what is wrong, regardless of what others may say. And deeming it best to spare the Tyrant’s life, thou didst successfully put thine own feelings aside. ’Tis an exceptional feat, one many an adult cannot manage.”

Hort scrunched up her face with all her might in an attempt to hold back the tears, her eyes and nose pushed so far toward the center of her face that it seemed like her features were in danger of coalescing to a single point. In the end, however, she could restrain them no longer, and big, round teardrops streamed down her face. This she buried in Los’s chest, shoulders heaving silently as she sobbed.

Just then, Holdem, who had remained silent up to this point, spoke up as though the thought had just occurred to him. “Right, well, I’m gonna head back to Wenias, but...are you going to come with, Loux Krystas? You’re headed to the Forbidden Library, right?”



Epilogue



“Verily, thou hast not one considerate bone in thy third-rate body! ’Tis that which inspires Albus to frown upon thee so!!”

“I know, I know, my bad... Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined you’d promise the students to stay and watch their progress, though...”

After Holdem’s untimely invitation, Hort had shrieked, “Professor Los is abandoning uuuus!” and begun wailing at the top of her lungs. Only with intense effort did Los manage to convince her it was all a misunderstanding.

True, she had indeed gained access to the Forbidden Library’s restricted section, but that did not necessarily mean she would depart immediately. For the moment, the three apprentice mages provided the greatest source of interest in Los’s life.

Within a matter of hours of learning Los would stay behind, Holdem had finished preparations for his own return journey and taken his steed’s reins in hand.

“Anyway, I guess a few years is practically nothin’ to you.”

“Indeed. Thou dost age rather dramatically in the brief periods between our meetings... And the next time, thou mayest have perished of old age.”

“Don’t gimme that crap! I’m as spunky and youthful as ever!”

Chuckling, Los waved goodbye. “In any event, I am, as thou canst see, quite occupied observing my fledglings. They grow so dramatically in the blink of an eye that I cannot look away, even for a moment. Fare thee well on the road.”

She offered these brief words of parting, then pranced off toward the students' dorm.

The previous day had been hard, and the three young people had decided to take this one off—except that Kudo had gone alone to the clinic to treat the anti-witch conspirator Los had brought in the night before.

The man was to be escorted off to Wenias presently for interrogation, so they could just as well let him hover on the boundary between life and death until then...but Kudo had insisted he couldn't call himself a doctor (magical or otherwise) while permitting a patient to suffer under his watch.

Earnest to a fault. And yet, that earnestness will indubitably aid in Kudo's growth. The thought gave Los a feeling of peace. *But, my heart! This means Saybil and Hort are alone together in the dormitory!*

Los was struck by a premonition that their relationship would take a dramatic turn, and snuck into their lodging through the back door—

“But you *could've* killed the Tyrant yesterday if you'd really wanted to, right, Hort?”

—at which snippets of a morbid conversation reached the witch's ears. Her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Gracious, what a cold fish. Saybil simply does not comprehend the flutterings of a young maid's heart.

“I was more worried about protecting you, Sayb! But I kinda ended up just jumping out to catch you and, like, didn't actually help much at all...”

“No way, you totally saved me. Sorry... This all happened because I got caught like an idiot.”

“Quit beating yourself up about that! But, are you okay? Your arm and legs

really don't hurt anymore?"

"No, they're fine. It's just..."

"It's just...?"

"...I seem to've gotten my memories back."

"Wha?!"

Wha?! Los almost cried out as well, catching herself in the very nick of time. She'd noticed Saybil acting rather strangely, but had chalked it up to the whirlwind of events over the past few days...

I half expected a more dramatic change in the lad... The witch had harbored misgivings that recalling those tragic memories might alter Saybil's personality. And yet, Saybil remains Saybil.

Los no longer felt as if there was any particular need to conceal herself, but she did have an inkling it would be slightly awkward if she jumped out of hiding at this point. And she couldn't help but feel it would prove more interesting to continue surreptitiously listening in on their conversation. Plopping herself down on the ground, Los settled in to eavesdrop on them in earnest.

"Y-You remembered?? Actually, now that you mention it, I feel like you said something about that when you were talking with the Tyrant..."

"Yeah... It wasn't exactly a happy memory, though..."

"N-No? Wanna forget again? Want me to hit you on the head?!"

"No thanks... Hort, put that blunt object down..." Saybil tried to pacify her in a voice tinged with fear. "I did remember, but it feels kind of like a dream... It still doesn't feel like something that actually happened to me. There's so much I want to ask Professor Zero, but...I need a little time to sort things out, first."

“O-Of course! That makes total sense! If talking about it will help, I’m always here to listen! Assuming you’d be okay talking with me about it, that is.”

“Thanks, Hort. You really are kind, you know that?”

“I mean... Anything for you, you know... Tee-hee!” Hort giggled bashfully.

Los clenched her fist. *Good, now in for the kill! This is your chance!*

“...Hey, Hort? What’s it feel like when you like someone?”

“Wha?!”

“I thought I didn’t understand that sort of feeling because of my amnesia. I’ve got my memories back now, though, and I still don’t have a clue... Professor Los said you have a crush on me, but...”

“Hunh?! Professor Los told you that?!”

“Yeah. But she tends to exaggerate, so...”

Silence.

“If I said she was right...what would you do, Sayb?”

Silence.

“Sorry... I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?”

“Like, what normally happens when you like someone... Or what...you would want to do with them. What do you want for you and me, Hort?”

“That’s... You know... Hard to say...”

Fool! Los ruffled her hair in exasperation. It took all she had to keep herself from leaping out and upbraiding Saybil—*How daarest thou force a young lass to explain such matters!*

“You don’t know either, huh...?”

“I mean, it all depends on the person! Like, you’re happy when you can see that person, or sad when you can’t, or you want them to think you’re cute or cool or whatever.”

“So it’s like...you want their approval?”

“Hmm... Maybe? It’s like, you want them to think you’re special. But even if they don’t, they’re still special to you...”

“Special...?” Saybil repeated, mulling over the word. “You’re special to me, Hort... Does that mean this is love...?”

“Huh...?!” Hort fell silent. There was a long pause. Then, at length: “...No, I don’t think so.”

Gone and said it, has she...

Los cradled her head in her hands, grateful she hadn’t seen the expression on Hort’s face as she spoke those fateful words. If she had, she would’ve felt the overpowering urge to crush the girl in an embrace.

“Sayb... Who do you want to be with in ten years?”

“Huh?”

“Like, is there someone you’d want to be with ten, even twenty years from now? Someone who you want to be your family. The kind of person where you wake up every morning and have breakfast together, as regular as the sun coming up. I think when you find someone who makes you feel like that, then you know it’s love.”

“But, both you and Kudo fit that description for me...”

“Really?! That makes me so happy! Okay, then we’re officially family, Sayb! I’ll

be your big sister!”

Los could hear Hort leap to her feet. She relaxed her furrowed brow. *What a heartwarming conversation. I could listen to this forever. Ah, if only.*

Holding the Staff of Ludens close, the witch closed her eyes. Sweet dreams seemed certain if she were to float off to sleep then and there.

“Wait, but this is, like, so hard to explain. Oh, I know! It’s the person whose face flashes through your mind in the moment you think it might be all over for you!”

“You mean like earlier?”

Hort smiled. “Oh yeah, you did come *this* close to dying today, huh!”

“Then...”

“Then?”

“Then I think I might like Professor Los.”

Afterword

Let your guard drop the teensiest bit and the months just fly by, don't they?

Hello, everyone, Kobashiri here. It felt pretty touch and go there for a minute, but thanks to all your support, we've made it through the second volume. And, as some of you may have already gathered from the way this one ended, all signs point to a third installment in the offing.

Thanks be to all of you.

Now then, what did you all think of this here chapter in the *Dawn of the Witch* saga? We had gushing blood! The struggles of adolescence! Love, even! Personally, I had a heck of a good time writing it.

When they asked me, "What are you thinking for the front cover?" I was in such high spirits that I just came out with, "Ooh, maybe we can have Los and Hort cuddling!"

In keeping with the super-duper cutesy cover, I crammed as many poppy rom-com touches into the subtitle and plot as I could. I doubt anyone who sees it will think, "Whoa, I'll bet a kid almost bleeds to death and a super buff guy gets his limbs hacked off!" That being said, I approached it with the lightest heart of any of my books thus far, so I'm hoping you enjoyed the generally humorous vibe as you read.

This series tells the tale of how these three young, inexperienced mages struggle to learn to survive in a world that is anything but kind. I hope to bring you more of the great strides they make in volume three, so please keep an eye out for it!

Speaking of great strides, have you seen the news?? It's happening—we're

getting a manga adaptation. I originally wrote the afterword totally unaware that we'd be announcing the project in tandem with the publication of this volume, but once I found out, I panicked, and now I'm rushing to rewrite this even as we speak. Tatsuo-sensei, who'll be handling the art, is wildly talented, draws amazing scenery, and is basically unbelievably great. Iwasaki-san and I were just going, "Amazing!" and, "Unbelievable!" over and over again.

I absolutely cannot wait for the manga to start.

Until next time, my friends.

Yours,

Kobashiri

Afterword

So?! You heard the news?! We're getting a manga!!

I'm so happy. Seriously, so, so happy.

I can't tell you how amazing it feels to know the characters I designed are getting drawn in a comic.

But wait! Have you seen the illustrations?!!!* I was blown away the first time I laid eyes on them. "What?! They're so good! So. Freakin'. GOOD!!!"

The portrayals really captured the heart of each character, and are adorable and awesome and all-around amazing. Kudo's especially—it's got some real power to it.

Tatsuo-sensei,

I believe it's been about six months since Shoji-san first showed me your drawings. Ever since then, I've been bouncing off the walls waiting to see it all come together in manga form...

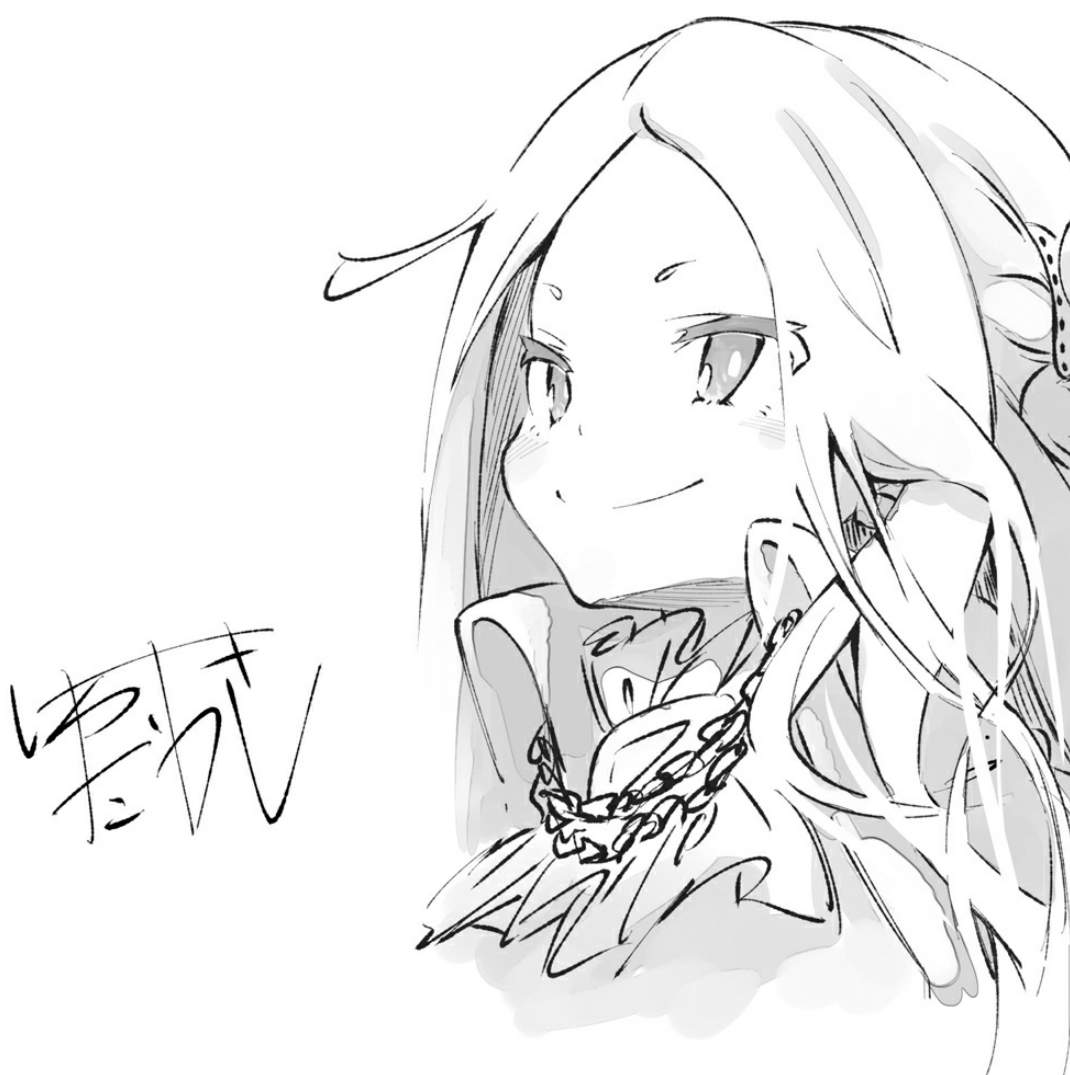
The thought honestly helped keep me going with my own work, and I've been dying to brag about it—to tell the world, "An amazing artist is gonna make a manga of our story!"

Now, I finally can.

“An amazing artist is gonna make a manga of our story!”

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the readers and everyone involved in the making of this volume.

Takashi Iwasaki



* The manga version of *The Dawn of the Witch* was first announced in Japan on an advertisement attached to this novel. You can check out the English edition at <https://kodansha.us/series/the-dawn-of-the-witch/>

Kakeru Kobashiri

An eternal newbie writer who loves fantasy and beauty-and-the-beast stories above all else. I always insist I'm not a furry because I love robots and monsters, too. Really I just love all relationships that involve some kind of difference.

Illustrator

Takashi Iwasaki

The main character got shunted to the background for this second cover, but I hope you like it all the same. Professor Los came out pretty cute, in my opinion.

The Dawn of the Witch 2

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